

ANNIHILATION SYMPHONY

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Abstract

This paper supports my thesis exhibition, *Annihilation Symphony*, displayed at York University's Gales Gallery. *Annihilation Symphony* is a multi-sensorial installation, using guitar amplification equipment, CRT televisions, video, and stringed sculpture to probe the potential of an artwork to affect the viewer's body/mind. It creates an interactive work which will use volume, space, imagery, and participation to stimulate atypical states of consciousness in the spectator. Feedback, as both sonic/visual phenomena and as a concept in nostalgia and cybernetics, is the center of the project, which features feedback from high-volume guitar amplifiers and closed-circuit video. Each formal component of the installation is explored through its respective grounding in my research in topics ranging from drone metal, 20th century video art, and consumption in capitalist society. The project also examines post-war cybernetics' ascendance to cultural hegemony, the control of how the past is presented, and the potential still held in history's lost dreams.

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Introduction

This paper supports my thesis exhibition, *Annihilation Symphony*, displayed at York University's Gales Gallery. This exhibition takes the form of an installation piece made up of guitar speaker cabinets, amplifiers, sculpture, and CRT televisions/monitors. *Annihilation Symphony* is a multi-sensorial installation, using guitar amplification equipment, CRT televisions, video, and stringed sculpture to probe the potential of an artwork to affect the viewer's body/mind. It creates an interactive work which will use volume, space, imagery, and participation to stimulate atypical states of consciousness in the spectator. Feedback, as both sonic/visual phenomena and as a concept in nostalgia and cybernetics, is the center of the project, which features high-volume guitar amplifier and closed-circuit video feedback. In this paper I will explore each formal component of the installation, explaining my process through its grounding in my research in topics ranging from drone metal, 20th century video art, and consumption in capitalist society. I will then dedicate the final pages to the core theoretical concerns of my work, delving into the socio-political ramifications of, and relationships between, second-order cybernetics, nostalgia, and hauntology. Here I explore post-war cybernetics' ascendance to cultural hegemony, the control of how the past is presented, and the potential still held in history's lost dreams. However, before these aforementioned analyses, I feel it is important to briefly describe my journey to this work over the course of my graduate studies.

Arriving at This Work: A Feedback Process of its Own

This project is the culmination of a rapid evolution in my practice, a direct product of using the principle of feedback as an artistic guide. At the beginning of my MFA program, I chose to initiate a pilot project which would then inform my final thesis work. This project came out of my recent ideas around bridging my art practice and music, culminating in the use of amplifier speaker cabinets as multi-sided painting panels with sound capability. Lack of woodworking skills and budgetary constraints led me to search the secondhand market for cheap defunct cabinets which I could strip down to bare wood and gesso. I acquired one, removed the hardware and tolex (the traditional upholstery material used on amplifiers and cabinets), primed it, and began the painting process. I was using my usual oil painting technique, working with similar imagery to my previous paintings, combining abstract forms and realistic figures. The sonic element was to revolve around an amplifier unit providing signal to the cabinet, with a guitar on a custom stand, plugged in, and the amplifier's volume set high enough for an acoustic feedback loop to start. Over the course of the academic year, I worked on this piece, discussed it with faculty and other artists, and read/researched. I decided that I would let the pilot project show me the direction to choose for the anticipated thesis work, and that whatever plan I was following with at any given time would be subject to change as I treated making and learning as course-corrective feedback processes.



Figure 1. The cabinet fully stripped and sanded.



Figure 2. The cabinet gessoed.

One of the most significant steps forward came when I discovered and developed a mild obsession with the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica after selecting him as the topic for a paper. The importance of Oiticica to my own work will be detailed below. As I worked on the painted element, it became clear that it would not only be impossible within the upcoming thesis project's timeline to create the number of paintings I had planned (up to my standards), but that the painted element no longer fit in conceptually with where the project was heading. Following Oiticica's trajectory, in which he left painting for participatory installation work,¹ I too chose to put down my brushes (for now) and let myself work entirely with the immersive and more found object focused aspects of my work. Researching the Brazilian artist also acted as a sort of 'final piece' to my continuing conceptual puzzle. In reading about his motivations and ideas, his published notebooks, and the scholarship surrounding him, I finally fully grasped my own intentions with my work, which had been eluding articulation for years. What felt like disparate elements and fragments of preoccupations all fell into place upon reading Karl Posso's assertion that Oiticica's work "cultivated, and exalted, the 'senseless' in order to shock...as a means of ushering in a change in viewers' life praxis".² I realized my consistent artistic goal has been to "organize delirium"³ towards a transformative end. Through this whole process, catalyzed by the pilot, I arrived at the work shown now.

¹ Oiticica's pivot from Concrete and Neoconcrete art (painting and sculpture) into wearables, and finally his 'quasi-cinemas' is explored variously in Basualdo et al., Braga, Skrebowski, and Posso.

² Posso, 57.

³ Basualdo et al., 39



Figure 3. Work-in-progress shot of one side of the cabinet.

Speaker Cabinets & Amplifiers

My final thesis project revolves around four vintage Traynor brand speaker cabinets, wired to two to four rented amplifier units (depending on shop availability and technical specifications). While the amplifiers produce the sound signal, it is the cabinets which do the work of filling the room with it, as well as creating the most striking visual impression.⁴ I selected the largest cabinets I could find on various online marketplaces for both sonic and aesthetic purposes. In both these regards, I was heavily informed by the fetish status of amplifiers in musical genres like rock and metal. Owen Coggins details this at length in a study of the materiality of sound in drone metal.⁵ He asserts that the genre's focus on volume and distortion over traditional song elements (structure, melody, virtuosity, etc.) makes it uniquely material, stating "The concern of drone metal is distorted amplification, rather than what is being amplified and distorted".⁶ This primacy of amplification itself is shared in my work where this equipment is being used not for conventionally 'musical' ends, but to create a tangible environment out of distorted sound. The fascination with amplifiers, and, as they increased in size, their speaker cabinets, has persisted since the invention of electric instruments themselves where players sought to exceed the intended use parameters of their equipment.⁷ As rock and roll exploded in popularity, bigger crowds and venues necessitated louder higher-wattage (and therefore physically larger) amplifiers with multi-speaker cabinets, which in turn became

⁴ I have often found that those unfamiliar with amplification equipment mistake the cabinet for the amplifier itself, which oftentimes is the case with smaller units, but not so with the vast majority of large-scale amps. These bigger amps typically feature a separate amplifier 'head', containing the electronics, paired with one or more speaker cabinets.

⁵ Coggins, Chapter 5 "Amplifier Worship: Materiality and Mysticism in Heavy Sound", 115 – 136.

⁶ Coggins, 115.

⁷ Coggins, 118.

symbolic of what Coggins describes as “musical power”.⁸ It is this incarnation of power which led many musicians (especially metal or drone metal players) to form a sort of devotional fetishization towards their now massive, near monolithic, amplifiers, as Coggins describes: “the phrase ‘amplifier worship’ has taken on wider significance for listeners who use it widely to describe drone metal and their relationship to it”.⁹ It is thus with both volume projection capability and sheer material size and presence that I selected my speaker cabinets.

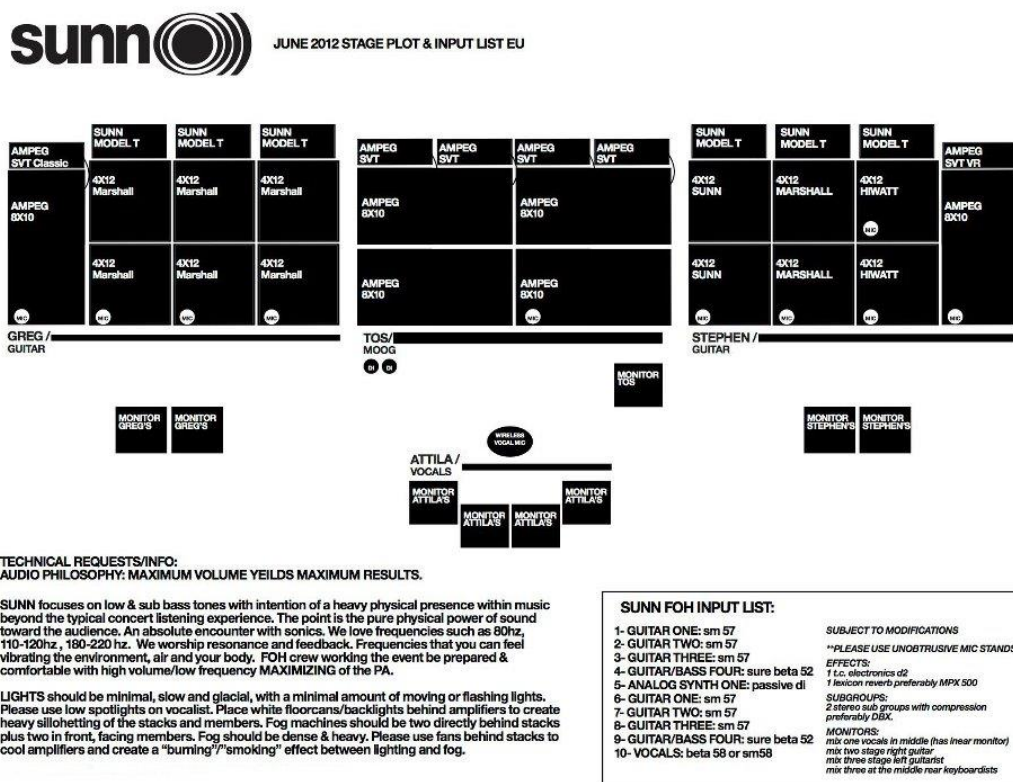


Figure 4. Drone metal band Sunn O)))'s stage plot from June 2012, displaying the array of amplification equipment used and outlining the sonic philosophy of the band.¹⁰

⁸ Coggins, 118.

⁹ Coggins, 119.

¹⁰ From: The Quietus, Sunn O)))'s stage set-up for their All Tomorrow's Parties gig tomorrow night. KOKO London shall tremble... . Facebook, 11 June 2012.

Out of the five total cabinets I bought, only two came equipped with speakers which helped keep the prices low. The consistent aesthetic of the four cabinets I have selected for this piece was a pleasant bit of luck, as the used market is wildly inconsistent in what is to be found and for what price. For my original purposes and initial pilot project, where the cabinet(s) would act as multi-sided painting panel(s), the models produced by the Canadian amplifier company Traynor in the 1970s were a perfect fit. Their flat rectangular sides, rubber bumpers (to provide framing) and generous dimensions provided an excellent canvas of sorts. However, this so-called ‘Bumper Cabinet’¹¹ design also proved to have a certain aesthetic allure to me, acting as a signifier of the decades they were produced and Traynor’s status as a minor icon in the amplifier world.

After months of regular browsing, providence struck when I found ads around Ontario for three essentially identical two twelve-inch speaker units (henceforth referred to as 2-12s), one matching unit with four ten-inch speakers (a 4-10), and a slightly less well matching fourth 2-12.¹² While even larger cabinets would be ideal for my work, budget concerns made this an impossibility and, regardless, the Traynors met my standards for scale, look, and sonic capability. Some of these cabinets were missing their original speakers, prompting another, eventually successful, online search for used speakers of appropriate wattage. I have chosen to keep the cabinets in their found condition, as their readymade nature and sense of historical embodiment through decades of wear and tear¹³ added to the sense of materiality and nostalgia for which I chose them. However, I have executed one intervention in their presentation which

¹¹ As they have since been dubbed by musicians.

¹² This unit was a different colour (grey as opposed to black) and orientation (speakers arranged horizontally instead of vertically) than the other three 2-12s and was thus not included in this project.

¹³ One even having been marked as a rental unit from an unknown, presumably long-gone music shop.

serves to further unify them and provides a basic visual analogue to their sonic output. The original speaker grills¹⁴ have been replaced with ones I have constructed, featuring reflective mylar sheets stretched on the frames. This mylar is intended to move, rippling in reaction to the air pushed by the speaker cones, creating a kinetic representation of the sound. When installed with the exhibition lighting, the cabinets will present mirror-like, pulsing fronts where the viewer will find themselves reflected and distorted in sync with the sound.

The amplifier units used in this project serve far less of an aesthetic function in the installation. Due to budgetary concerns, I have chosen to rent amp heads from local music shops, which allows me access to high quality reliable equipment I would otherwise be unable to afford at this time. The amps used in this iteration of the project are modern Traynors, which are then placed on plinths across from the speaker cabinets. These are fed signal from the below described stringed sculpture and connected to the cabinets which have been wired appropriately for the amps' voltage and impedance parameters. Despite lacking the more dramatic visual impact of the large cabinets, these amps still contain the sense of Coggins's aforementioned "musical power",¹⁵ especially for any viewer with knowledge of such equipment.

¹⁴ The protective stretched cloth panels covering the speakers.

¹⁵ Coggins, 118.



Figure 5. The five speaker cabinets.

The String Sculpture

As Robert M. Poss reminds us, “the guitar and amplifier chain comprises a single electric instrument”¹⁶ (though he neglects to include the speakers and their cabinet here). While heavily reliant on the latter, this project does not feature the iconic former, instead opting to create a new sort of electric instrument. The choice to not include any guitars in the installation was meant to circumvent the typical primacy of the stringed instrument over its amplification equipment which has persisted since the 1960s.¹⁷ By doing so, I intend to further reinforce the materiality of the amps, cabinets, and sound. With this in mind, the focus will turn to the element of the installation fulfilling the “guitar’s” role in the larger instrument.

This project uses a sculptural element created through deconstructing the guitar into only the elements required for acoustic feedback. I arrived at this creation through many years of experimenting with guitar feedback, trying various pickup¹⁸ types, positions, string tunings, and effect pedals. I concluded that for the purposes of this installation, the stringed component which would complete my greater instrument would consist of the following:

- A hollow rectangular wooden box as the “body”. The hollow nature of the box will increase feedback vibrations along the same principles as hollow body guitars, which are notoriously prone to feedback and noise – a clearly desirable feature in this context. The box is designed with a 25 ¼ inch scale length for the strings. In electric guitars, this is considered on the longer side and helps to maintain string tension when using low tunings.

¹⁶ Poss, 46.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ The magnetic device which allows for metal string vibrations to be “picked up” and sent to an amp.

- 4 pickups mounted horizontally across the center of the box, evenly spaced, and wired to basic 1/4" output jacks with volume and tone controls for each. These controls and outputs are found along the left and right sides of the body.
- 24 strings stretched vertically across, spaced to match pickup positions. They are attached and rest on hard wooden pieces on the top and bottom of the body which act as points of contact similar to a guitar bridge and/or frets while also holding the strings in place. The strings are secured through holes in the bottom piece and then wrapped around tuning pins along the top of the body. These strings are of a 0.052 gauge thickness and are tuned to a low B note for a bass centered feedback sound.¹⁹
- The box is upholstered with the same tolex material as used on cabinets and amplifiers. I selected a tolex as close as possible to that on the cabinets I am using, as a way to visually connect the stringed object with the amplification equipment. The intention, as well, is to create further distance from the visual language of the electric guitar, offsetting the use of guitar strings and pickups.

This object exists as a sort of pseudo-guitar, a device which cannot be played by conventional means, and which exists solely to interact with an amplifier. Depending on installation sites, it can be either wall mounted or held by a stand and moved to appropriate distances from the cabinets.

¹⁹ It has been my finding that this note is one of the lowest a traditional guitar can go while still holding a decent amount of tension. Some may differ on this opinion.

Acoustic Feedback

It is in the interplay between the amplifiers/cabinets and the strings/pickups²⁰ where feedback as a formal element finds its most immediate and obvious expression. An acoustic feedback loop can be established by setting the amplifiers to a high enough volume and placing the strings near enough that the sound of the amp then vibrates the strings. Effect boxes, specifically signal boosters, distortion, or fuzz²¹ pedals can facilitate this process and add harmonic richness and colour to the sound. The sound produced will then evolve on its own, modulating over time as strings may lose their tuning and/or as they come together in a resonant system. By resonant system, I am referring to Photinos's description of resonance in guitar strings:

If the guitar is tuned, pressing one finger at the fifth fret of the top (E) string corresponds to the same tone as the open fifth string (A). When the top string is plucked, the A string will begin to vibrate as well. The vibrations of the top strings are transmitted through the saddle of the guitar to the A string, and since the frequencies match, we have resonance.²²

With every string on the sculpture being tuned to the same pitch and all anchored to the same piece of wood, this resonance is achieved, and the strings encourage each other to vibrate. This is similar to the effect found in instruments which use 'sympathetic strings', which are not played but instead "are tuned to resonate with some of the tones that are produced by the played strings,

²⁰ Henceforward for simplicity's sake I will refer to the amplifier and cabinet combination as just the amplifier or amp, and the string – pickup interplay as simply 'the strings'.

²¹ 'Fuzz' refers to a particularly aggressive take on the standard musical distortion effect.

²² Photinos, 16-17.

which makes the tone last a bit longer, and produce a fuller sound”.²³ The acoustic feedback is further enriched and a feedback dynamic between the strings themselves is also created.

In addition to the interactions between the strings and between the strings and amplifiers, the sound filling the exhibition spaces will be reacting to the physical presence of the viewers. The bodies and clothing of people in the room will both absorb and alter the flow of sound waves, thus affecting the way in which the acoustic feedback is generated. The larger a group, the more noticeable of an effect.

This type of electric instrument feedback is often considered to sit precariously on the boundary between music and noise (used pejoratively). On this divide, Coggins refers to the work of Jacques Attali on the “speculative political economy of music”.²⁴ He writes,

Attali, along Girardian lines, suggests that music (as opposed to noise) is an analogue of social organization (as opposed to violent chaos). Music, via this analogy, can make modes of social organization audible to listeners. Therefore music, for Attali, can be both an abstract representation of social structures and an instrumental tool in political economy.²⁵

Music is here regarded as noise that has had violence done to it to make it socially acceptable, so it “models the existing social structure” in the same sense that social order itself is perceived as an imposition of violence/discipline.²⁶ The generative potential of ‘noise’ (as the term is used in

²³ Photinos, 17.

²⁴ Coggins, 165.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

both sound and information) is regarded negatively as it “contains threatening new possibilities for new modes of social organization”.²⁷

²⁷ Coggins, 165.

The Installation as a Piece of Self-Performing Music

Despite its framing, this being a work made within a “Visual Art” graduate program and being presented as an art installation, I believe this to be a project which lives obviously in the world of music as well, warranting a brief exploration. This is not to overlook the importance of the visual elements in the work, but instead to offer another perspective on the installation, wherein said visuals function largely as corollaries of the sound. In interpreting my work as a musical exploration, I have drawn from Blom and Strickland’s examination of Annea Lockwood’s *Piano Burning* to propose this installation as a piece of self-performing drone²⁸ music. There are several parallels between *Annihilation Symphony* and *Piano Burning* which back this assertion, specifically: the use of “readymade” materials in Lockwood’s salvaged pianos and my second hand, often defunct, cabinets, the role of the performer as “sounder” or “event framer”, and the audience involvement/participation.²⁹

Blom states in reference to her performance of *Piano Burning* that “If the preparation is correct, then the piece performs itself which leaves me free to move around the work, talk with audience members, become an active member and gain different aural and visual perspectives...”³⁰ This is very much the same situation with my work, where the establishment of the acoustic feedback is a matter of positioning, tuning, plugging-in, and turning switches and knobs – all intense preparation in order for the piece to become self-performing through its own feedback loop. As well, in a similar way to how Lockwood’s piece works at “drawing an

²⁸ Or perhaps drone metal?

²⁹ Blom and Strickland, 11-20. Lockwood’s work is outlined throughout the entire chapter.

³⁰ Blom and Strickland, 16.

audience's attention to the hitherto unheard sounds from the piano",³¹ *Annihilation Symphony* exposes audiences to the unfamiliar³² sonic textures and physical sensations to be found in the extreme use of amplified feedback. The final parallel I will stress is the uniqueness of each performance of the work, in which no two activations are the same. Just as *Piano Burning* will be a different experience each time for reasons of "instrument, recording equipment... techniques, sounder, audience, location, weather, etc." and historical context,³³ so too will performances of *Annihilation Symphony* vary with string age, magnetic degradation, speaker wear, tube/amplifier condition and model, room temperature/humidity, and room size and materials, to begin to name a few of the material variables. This is not to mention audience interpretation and reaction, the subjectivities wherein which the meaning of the work is constructed, the importance of which is stressed by Strickland, who says, "...these pieces require presence at a live event. Without an audience, they could appear as academic conjecture".³⁴

I find myself interpreting this work as an approach towards a kind of speculative evolution of drone metal's obsession with the materiality of the music. Here, the often "performed subordination to amplifiers"³⁵ becomes a total surrender to the objects and their sound with the removal of the performer in favour of the "sounder" described by Blom and Strickland.³⁶ Amplification itself, and the ceaseless drone of feedback resulting, are all that remain. Once properly prepared, the amplifier-cabinet-strings-pickup instrument needs only voltage and a human hand to flick the switches to "ON".

³¹ Blom and Strickland, 17.

³² Unfamiliarity which depends of course on audience members' individual musical tastes/experiences.

³³ Blom and Strickland, 21.

³⁴ Blom and Strickland, 22.

³⁵ Coggins, 123.

³⁶ Blom and Strickland, 15.



Figure 6. Annea Lockwood at a 1968 performance of Piano Burning.³⁷

³⁷ "Carleton to Stage Rare Performance of Controversial 'Piano Burning' - Carleton College." *Carleton*, 28 Apr. 2009.

CRT Televisions

While I chose to discard painting for this project, I still wanted to have a strong visual element – some sort of dynamic lighting, projection, etc. The use of CRT televisions was inspired by the suggestion of committee member Archer Pechawis. I found this to be a perfect fit with the project's concept as it would allow me to continue to use second-hand/found materials (through the acquisition of television sets sold cheaply on online marketplaces) as well as providing me with another reactive material to generate different sorts of feedback with. CRT technology is infamously responsive to magnetic interference, a flaw which I exploit in my installation.

Starting in the early 1960s, the work of Nam June Paik probed the limits of CRT reactivity. I draw from his early work, specifically the 1963 installation of *Exposition of Music – Electronic Television*,³⁸ the same year's *Participation TV 1*³⁹ and 1965's *Magnet TV*.⁴⁰ In the first, Paik modified a series of television sets to create abstracted images through the introduction of circuitry modifications, signal disruption via external media interference, and viewer interactive inputs.⁴¹ The second revolved around viewers speaking into microphones to generate images (a feature also included in *Exposition of Music – Electronic Television*).⁴² The third demonstrates the dramatic effect a magnet can have on the television picture. I also find Paik's philosophy towards readymades fascinating. His writing describes how he saw his use of the

³⁸ Outlined in depth in Joselit, pg. 7-12.

³⁹ Described in Joselit, pg. 81.

⁴⁰ Joselit, 75.

⁴¹ Joselit, 7.

⁴² Joselit, 81.

very “electrons and protons” which form the television picture as a way to work with what he saw as the very foundations of reality.⁴³ In his modification of television sets, he set out to make these particles his medium, and as Joselit explains, “refigured television’s ecology of image production: his ‘medium’ became the patterns of scanning itself”.⁴⁴ It is also important to note that Paik’s work was groundbreaking at its time for allowing one to take an active participatory role towards a television set, which had previously been interacted with through passive contemplation. I find a direct parallel in this engagement with the materiality of image production to the materiality of amplification described above, in which the medium is no longer the image or sound transmitted through the object, but the functioning of the object itself.



Figure 7. Nam June Paik, *Magnet TV*, 1965. In the Whitney Museum of American Art's collection.⁴⁵

⁴³ Joselit, 58-60.

⁴⁴ Joselit, 60.

⁴⁵ From: “Nam June Paik: Magnet TV.” *Whitney Museum of American Art*, 2024.

Guitar speakers use fairly large magnets to generate sound, and, when in close proximity, the generated magnetic field warps and distorts the televisions' picture based on the output of the speaker. This then creates a feedback loop involving the cabinets, televisions, and viewers. As the viewers move around the exhibition space and, being drawn in by the modulations, inspect the images on the screens, they will then affect the flow of air and sound in the room thus influencing the acoustic feedback. This in turn will change the output of the speakers, and in so doing will change the way they affect the television sets.



Figure 8. Initial testing of speaker magnet/CRT television interaction.

Video Feedback

While viewers' bodily relationship to the acoustic feedback may not be immediately obvious to them, it is through a closed-circuit video feed that they will be made more directly conscious of themselves and their relationship to the exhibition space. This element of the exhibition was inspired both by my contemporaries⁴⁶ and the use of video feedback in 20th century video art, as elaborated on by Joselit. Works like Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider's *Wipe Cycle* (1969),⁴⁷ and more directly, Dan Graham's *Time Delay Room 5* (1974),⁴⁸ Bruce Nauman's *Live-Taped Video Corridor* (1970) and Peter Campus's *cir* (1976)⁴⁹ have informed my use of the closed-circuit video feedback loop. Whereas these works used closed-circuit video to display the viewer to themselves with various temporal or spatial distortions, my use of the technique revolves around the 'infinity' effect produced by a camera directly facing the screens it sends signal to, paired with the magnetic distortions produced by the speakers.

⁴⁶ Specifically, the A/V work of my friend Lewis Caunter, whom I also consulted on various technical elements of this project.

⁴⁷ Described in Joselit, pg. 93-97.

⁴⁸ Joselit, pg. 105-106.

⁴⁹ Both works described in Joselit, pg. 155-157.



Figure 9. Bruce Nauman, *Live-Taped Video Corridor*, 1970. Original exhibition at the Nicholas Wilder Gallery, Los Angeles.⁵⁰

In *Annihilation Symphony*, a single video camera aimed directly at the television sets sends one signal via a signal splitter to all four, creating a visual feedback effect where the screens show seemingly infinite repetitions of the live feed. Here, viewers may watch themselves extending into infinity on the screen and will also see the magnetic interference from the speakers modulating their image. My intentions with this are to reinforce the feedback interactivity between the viewer and installation, and by doing so blur the distinction between spectator and spectacle. As with Nauman's *Live-Taped Video Corridor*, the viewer in *Annihilation Symphony* is filmed from behind in the exhibition space, only seeing themselves

⁵⁰ From: "Bruce Nauman: Live-Taped Video Corridor." *The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation*, 2023.

from behind and diminishing in size as they approach the televisions – an effect which, as Joselit describes, “makes visitors acutely aware of their own bodies”⁵¹ and:

shatters the complacency of [...] television’s ‘complicit viewer’ by simultaneously frustrating the uncritical consumption of character (in part by foreclosing identification with a face) and making the act of viewing self-conscious through the spectator’s heightened physical awareness.⁵²

What is typically presented on screen, once that of the television and now near ubiquitously that of the computer or smart phone, is what both Joselit and Debord would describe as, respectively, “images of personal conviction and ‘proper social roles’”⁵³ or “[distillations of] the essence of the spectacle’s banality into images of possible roles.”⁵⁴ The use of video art against these is described:

As a fundamental condition in producing a commercial public sphere, such figure-ground collapse leads [...] to a kind of stasis, or what [Michael Fried] calls ‘presentness.’ The product of commercial television is precisely such presentness, which, constantly refreshed, renders corporate ideology as ‘breaking news.’ But in video art, the correspondence between figure and ground, or between person and picture, is explicitly brought out of alignment. In place of presentness is the dilated moment of the *feedback loop*.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Joselit, 155.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Debord, 38.

⁵⁵ Joselit, 155-157. Emphasis mine.



Figure 10. Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider, *Wipe Cycle*, 1969. Exhibited in 2018 at ZKM.⁵⁶

It is here that I must also reference the work of H lio Oiticica, specifically his 1970s project in collaboration with Neville D’Almeida,⁵⁷ *Block Experiments in Cosmococa, Program in Progress* (to be referred to henceforth as the *Cosmococas*). As I mentioned above, Oiticica’s work had a profound effect on me, and he became either the subject or a primary feature of several of the papers I have written over the course of my MFA program. The *Cosmococas* were regarded by Oiticica as “quasi-cinemas”,⁵⁸ which, similarly to Joselit’s analysis of the work described above, were designed to disrupt the “subject-object logic that organizes all narrative”

⁵⁶ Photo: Franz J. Wamhof, from: “Frank Gillette, Ira Schneider: *Wipe Cycle*: 1969.” ZKM, 2024.

⁵⁷ While this series of works was very much a collaboration between the two men (and is asserted as such in Oiticica’s writings), Oiticica is typically perceived as the primary artist behind the project in the majority of analyses. (See Basualdo et al, Butler, Posso, Skrebowski, and Small)

⁵⁸ Butler, 128.

and to challenge the spectator-spectacle relationship.⁵⁹ Here I will focus on the visual and spatial elements in the *Cosmococas*, as they also included curated sound/music elements which hold fewer parallels to my project (other than the use of Jimi Hendrix's music/general rock sensibility).

Oiticica saw the dominance of the camera's point of view and the narrative linearity in cinema as intimately connected to the imposition of subject-object/spectator-spectacle division.⁶⁰ He believed that this format served to separate the viewer and their body and, rather than prompt identification with their own body, instead impose an identification with the camera-eye's point of view.⁶¹ On this Oiticica wrote:

... all my work... has been a development of the disintegration of formal concepts (starting with that of 'painting' itself) of art, and looking for a form of non-contemplative contact; the participation of the spectator (and participator) touching, wearing, penetrating the actual pieces, developed towards actual propositions... something similar to practices of the spontaneous self, non-ritualistic, as an actual *anti-art permanent position*; the detail of the artist as a creator of objects, but turned into the proposer of practices...⁶²

I pair this quotation with one from Debord, selected from Thesis 30 of *The Society of the Spectacle*, which I feel elaborates on the importance of Oiticica's desire for "non-contemplative contact"⁶³ and echoes Joselit's above analysis:

⁵⁹ Basualdo et al., 51.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Small.

⁶² Skrebowski, 72.

⁶³ Ibid.

The spectator's alienation from and submission to the contemplated object [...] works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires [...] the individual's own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him.⁶⁴

In the *Cosmococas*, Oiticica and D'Almeida used a series of projected still images, alternating slowly over time, to break what Small refers to as the "projected time of filmic image"⁶⁵ and instead be in their own personal time.⁶⁶ No narrative can be clearly identified, there is no coherent point of view, and the exhibition space⁶⁷ is arranged in such a way as to encourage those entering to move around, engage with written instructions for activities, and generally "hang out".⁶⁸ Participators (as Oiticica referred to the viewers) would then become part of the work and its visual environment through their movement: interrupting the projections and casting shadows, essentially completing the *Cosmococas* through their presence.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Debord, 23.

⁶⁵ Small.

⁶⁶ Butler, 132

⁶⁷ As I will tentatively refer to it here. Given Oiticica's disdain for the traditional art world and the fact that none of the *Cosmococas* were ever publicly executed in his lifetime or intended to be presented as "art exhibitions", I do not believe the term to be fully appropriate.

⁶⁸ As Small refers to it, an "elaborate form of 'hanging out'" – Small.

⁶⁹ Ibid.



Figure 11. Hélio Oiticica and Neville D'Almeida, *Cosmococa/CC3 Maileryn*, 1973. Currently exhibited at the Inhotim Institute in the Cosmococa Gallery.⁷⁰

I view *Annihilation Symphony* as a sort of evolution or “feeding back” of these above-described works. The main principles of subject-object, spectator-spectacle disruption, and bodily awareness/focus are the core intentions of my work with video feedback, as well as with the distortion of image through magnetic interference. As well, the integration of the viewer as part of the work itself and thus being necessary to complete it was very much inspired by these artists and their philosophies.

⁷⁰ Photo: Daniel Mansur, from: “Cosmococa/CC3 Maileryn.” *Inhotim*, 2021.



Figure 12. Hélio Oiticica and Neville D'Almeida, *Cosmococa/CC5 Hendrix-War*, 1973. Currently exhibited at the Inhotim Institute in the Cosmococa Gallery.⁷¹

⁷¹ Photo: William Gomes, from: “Cosmococa/CC5 Hendrix-War.” *Inhotim*, 2022.

The Installation as a Feedback Loop

I have up to this stage described the various feedback processes which constitute *Annihilation Symphony*. What is key to the work at large is the way in which all of these processes interact and thus form a great feedback loop which then becomes the totality of the installation itself. The elements of the project work to influence each other as previously described: viewers move through the space interacting with the video feed, observing visual elements, or positioning themselves in different relationships to the sound. In doing so, they become part of the greater feedback process that is the installation itself through their physical presence affecting these processes. Sound movement in the room, and thus the timbre of the feedback, is changed by viewer position and number of bodies in the space, thus altering the speaker's magnetic interference on the television sets. These visual modulations will draw further attention to the screens, thus heightening awareness of the video feedback effect and encouraging reaction. The relationships between and within each element of the installation and between the viewer and the installation are the primary formal elements in *Annihilation Symphony*; once an exhibition attendee begins to understand how the feedback cycles work and what can be done to influence them, a space for playfulness and exploration opens up.

Aside from feedback in the literal sense as just described, the installation imparts a sense of historical looping as well. The use of “retro” technology and objects elicits for many a sense of instant nostalgia, bringing to mind far more than just a desire for old tech. Tanner describes how often these items bring a sense of longing for the types of music, films, lifestyles, etc. which they had traditionally played, showed, or influenced in the past, as well as a positive looking

back on their limitations.⁷² Poss elaborates further in proposing that people also become nostalgic for the technological interventions/artifacts which characterize all media, citing specifically the ways in which equipment of a certain decade colours the sound of a recording and how one can experience nostalgia for that particular “sound”.⁷³

It is my intention for the very clearly “vintage” objects occupying the exhibition space to bring a sense of the past into the present in this way, but without the typical comfort nostalgia offers. The disruption of the typical nostalgia-as-advertising/algorithm⁷⁴ through the blunt materiality of pure amplification and electrons, mediating nothing but themselves in relation to themselves and the direct surrounding environment, will hopefully serve to create a novelty and discomfort around the nostalgic emotion. Perhaps amidst the roar of the amplifiers, the televisual distortions, and the feeling of one’s own body reverberating, a space for new perspectives can be made in regard to the past, present, and potential futures spiraling outwards from them. It will be different for each person experiencing the piece, and thus each person will experience their own unique feedback experience around these objects, the work as a whole, and their own personal context.

⁷² Tanner, 141.

⁷³ Poss, 47.

⁷⁴ To be examined below.

The Exhibition Space

One of the most challenging aspects of executing this work is determining its installation location. Traditional galleries, along with most public-oriented spaces, either cannot or do not wish to accommodate the relatively extreme volume levels the project demands. Spaces with sound-proofing or other forms of acoustic treatment, i.e., concert venues and rehearsal rooms, typically charge a rental fee for their facilities and often include various staffing or other personnel costs/requirements. The tight budget of a graduate student prohibited the use of these sorts of venues and has thus required other arrangements to be made. This iteration of *Annihilation Symphony* takes place at York University's Gales Gallery, a decision made out of both convenience and necessity as York has provided the space for my use⁷⁵ for a five-day exhibition, albeit with hesitation surrounding the volume levels. I consider this to be an excellent experiment to see how this type of project interacts with this more traditional gallery space, as well as within the university environment. I will be installing some wall mounted soundproofing⁷⁶ in the gallery to try to reduce the impact the work will have on the rest of the building, though the volume will no doubt escape containment regardless.

Annihilation Symphony has a modular aspect to it which is quite suitable to creating multiple unique showings: it can be installed in various different ways and its elements can be taken further or reduced. I intend to continue to show this project after my thesis exhibition and hold the ambition to one day carry out displays in a sort of musical concert tour format, with different venues being used for one night at a time and the work moving on from place to place.

⁷⁵ York provides use of the Special Projects Gallery or Gales Gallery for each graduate student's exhibition.

⁷⁶ Acquired second-hand from York's AGYU redevelopment project courtesy of Assistant Curator Clara Halpern.

In this respect I am inspired by Oiticica's approach to the aforementioned *Cosmococas*, whose original long form title featured the phrase "program in progress," and which was intended by the artist to exist as a sort of forever work-in-progress as opposed to a finished piece of art.⁷⁷ I view *Annihilation Symphony* as its own program in progress, bringing the same sense of seriality where innumerable potential mutations can exist as installation sites and contexts, along with budgets, change. Oiticica also had different specifications for showing his work in public, i.e., installation or "happening" style events, vs. private showings, which were akin to "private house parties"⁷⁸ – an idea which I aim to explore further with this project.

⁷⁷ Posso, 73.

⁷⁸ Butler, 129.

A Note on Volume

The idea of the volume levels demanded by this project have been met with mixed response from various peers and faculty members throughout its creation. Given this, I feel it necessary to comment on the necessity of volume in the project, as well as to acknowledge the drawbacks of its use. Coggins writes at length about the use of extreme volume in drone metal, describing the paradoxical experience many listeners have of the sound both being perceived as “like violence, or as if violent, or as violence” yet simultaneously able to “make listeners feel more in touch with reality and grounded in their emotions and self-perceptions and more connected with others in a listening community”.⁷⁹ My use of these decibel levels is informed by Coggins’s description of how:

violent noise is closely linked by listeners to extraordinary experience, described as indescribable or beyond language, or vibrations that feel like they are coming from inside listeners’ own bodies. Such extreme experiences even suggest dissolution of consciousness or a disintegration of subjectivity.⁸⁰

While typically considered wholly negative,⁸¹ for many communities of listeners extreme sound is sought after and valued, even at the expense of physical wellbeing, as Coggins describes drone metal audience members who have vomited from the sonic pressure at concerts – with one extreme example of an attendee’s lung collapsing (this person then stated they would make an effort to see that same band again).⁸² Of course, the volume levels encountered in *Annihilation Symphony* are nothing close to those used in large scale drone metal performances, but the

⁷⁹ Coggins, 158.

⁸⁰ Coggins, 161.

⁸¹ An opinion expressed to me by many.

⁸² Coggins, 159.

physical effects are still palpable, as is the communalizing nature of the visceral experience of sound wherein all present are conscious of experiencing the same phenomenon together.⁸³

It is my intention to use this phenomenon to create unique states of being in exhibition attendees, and in this endeavor, I again draw connection to the work of Hélio Oiticica. I included a part of a quotation from Posso's *An Ethics of Displaying Affection: Hélio Oiticica's Expressions of Joy and Togetherness* near the beginning of this paper, but will now refer to the quote in full as I believe its relevance to my use of volume will be clear:

Oiticica's art shuns representation of affection in favour of affection as 'violent' sensation, a means of interrupting action-reaction circuits; in this respect, it reveals itself to be an heir to Dada and a kindred spirit of Fluxus, both of which cultivated, and exalted, the 'senseless' in order to shock - to rupture socio-cultural equanimity and 'aesthetic immanence' - as a means of ushering in a change in viewers' life praxis.⁸⁴

It is in this spirit that I hope to utilize the cathartic nature of such experiences which, as Coggins describes in reflections on interviews with concert attendees, contain such complexities within them as to be described as both "violent confrontation and endurance" yet simultaneously bearing "healing, meditation, and transcendence".⁸⁵

Even with the generally positive aims outlined above, it remains important to examine the problematic aspects of such large sound levels. In the realms of process and exhibition, the use of high volumes makes planning difficult and access to venues challenging. For instance, I needed

⁸³ Coggins, 162.

⁸⁴ Posso, 57.

⁸⁵ Coggins, 161.

to use a band rehearsal studio to be able to run any tests with the installation's audio equipment. Accessibility concerns come up as well, as not every potential attendee may wish to or can be exposed to these decibel levels. I have made sure to provide signage visible before entering the exhibition space which informs visitors that they will be entering a sonic landscape akin to a live rock concert, as well as providing free hearing protection to allow for a more comfortable/less potentially ear damaging experience.⁸⁶

Extreme volumes also hold the potential for more sinister applications, many of which have been explored by governments around the world as a tool for repression. Where loudness can smother speech and participation, the use of sound can extend far further than just drowning out opposition. Militaries and police forces, as well as commercial enterprises, have manipulated volume and sound to achieve goals where blood shed is politically unviable or where the presence of deterrent devices would be deemed unbecoming for public relations purposes.⁸⁷ Use of 'non-lethal' sonic technology has ranged from loudspeaker assisted "harassment operations" in Iraq by US forces (2002-2004), outright torture perpetrated by the CIA, to "sound cannons" deployed on Wall Street, in Gaza, and on standby for use at the 2012 London Olympics.⁸⁸ In *An Epistemology of Noise*, Cecile Malaspina describes this second case: "[...] CIA interrogation techniques are known to have long relied on sound in so called 'no-touch torture', relying on 'the capacity of sound and music to destroy subjectivity'".⁸⁹ I feel this exists in direct contrast to *Annihilation Symphony*, which seeks to disrupt subjectivity and create room for unique

⁸⁶ Unprotected exposure to the installation will result in the same after-effects of attending a concert without earplugs. These sorts of events/experiences are widely available and are attended by large amounts of people regularly without any major complaints around sound levels – I have found that the attitude towards volume changes in the context of fine arts.

⁸⁷ Malaspina, 157.

⁸⁸ Malaspina, 158.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

experiences in a way that is safe, consensual, and with positive intentions. Like the safety that must be ensured before a sexual kink is explored (safe words, boundaries, and, above all, consent) or before a drug experience is undertaken,⁹⁰ this installation offers a way to experience the dramatic effects of volume in a way that the attendee permits and can, hopefully, enjoy/derive some meaning out of.

⁹⁰ The aforementioned CIA's MKULTRA experiments are another direct example of this, as a person's experience of willingly taking LSD in a positive setting is dramatically different than being secretly dosed and tortured.

Acquisition of Materials – Online Marketplaces, Nostalgia, and Consumption

Here I wish to comment on a significant portion of my process making this work: that of buying secondhand. The primary constitutive elements of the project, the CRT TVs and speaker cabinets (along with four speakers) were sourced from two online marketplaces, Kijiji and Facebook Marketplace. I found myself regularly checking these websites, spending hours browsing, to find the right materials. The factors of timing, seller proximity, and price all made for an exhausting search. I previously described my luck in finding the matching Traynor cabinets—this was not a common occurrence as they only emerged after months of nearly no results. My motivation in all my acquisitions was to find cheap, unwanted, and old items which I could repurpose for my own ends. However, I would soon find that the “vintage” trend would make such a task more difficult than originally anticipated.

Acquiring these objects was a fascinating case study into nostalgia and object fetishization. Musical equipment has been particularly affected in this regard. As Poss has noted, “equipment retro-fetishism drives up prices and, as many older engineers have noted, cast-off equipment recently serving as studio doorstops – once rechristened ‘vintage’ – now commands ridiculously high prices”.⁹¹ Equipment I would see for sale a decade ago on the same or similar platforms had often doubled or tripled in price, which ended up dictating what gear I would end up using for this project, with the old Traynors being simply the cheapest options. Even with that being the case, I encountered collectors of specifically vintage Traynor amplifiers and cabinets, one seller claiming to own twelve of the same amplifier unit, along with a plethora of cabinets

⁹¹ Poss, 47.

and other amplifier models. Sellers like that had me thinking of Baudrillard's critiques from *The System of Objects*, in which objects regarded as "antique" (or vintage in this case) become simply signifiers of time as opposed to functional objects.⁹² In the case of the Traynor products they, while still capable of making sound (and certainly being played occasionally in the basement), have ceased to be merely the instruments they once were and have instead attained a "mythological" status. Baudrillard asserts that,

The fully realized event that the mythological object signifies is birth. I am not the one who *is*, in the present, full of *angst* – rather, I am the one who *has been*, as indicated by the course of the reverse birth of which the antique object is the sign, a course which leads from the present far back into time: a regression, therefore.⁹³

We can also understand this, perhaps a bit more easily, through the analysis of nostalgia offered by Tanner: nostalgia functions as an emotion which helps one to regain a sense of control in situations where one is uneasy, by looking backwards to simplified pasts where life is able to be perceived more fondly.⁹⁴

⁹² Baudrillard, 77-78.

⁹³ Baudrillard, 80. Emphasis is the author's.

⁹⁴ Tanner, 4.



\$300.00



Vintage Traynor YF-10 4x10 Speaker Cab

Brampton | 1 day ago

1973 Traynor 4x10" guitar/bass speaker cabinet. 100 Watts, 8 Ohms. 10" Marsland speakers, sounds great. Re-grilled with Traynor Re-issue vintage grille cloth from Yorkville. Casters...



\$1,300.00



Vintage 1973 Trainer Amplifier with Head

District de Riviere-Blanche | 2 days ago

Vintage Trainer (Bass) Amplifier very nice. Looked up the other vintage amplifiers for a respectful price(ball park) .This amplifier is all tubes .Taking up room in my living room . I use...



\$1,375.00

Rare 2-1968 Traynor 212 cab+1 Eminence Commonwealth+1 Sidewinder

City of Toronto | 3 days ago

Ultra Rare - Two Ultimate Guitar Speaker Cabs - Impossible To Find these cabs and Impossible to find these speakers - Two 1968 Traynor YT-12 Twin Special 2x12 cabs...



\$850.00



Traynor Head

Kitchener / Waterloo | 2 months ago

Vintage '70s Traynor bass amp. Recently serviced by Rich at Amplifiers Plus in Cambridge, have not played or used since service was done. New tubes, new cord. The tolex on the back is jus...



Traynor g3 412 group 3 4x12 guitar amplifier speaker cabinet

\$180.00

Figure 13. Screenshots of ads for Traynor amps and cabinets from Kijiji.

A similar phenomenon was encountered in the acquisition of the television sets. Expecting them to be commonly viewed as obsolete heavy nuisances which people would be happy to give away, I was surprised to find that CRTs had become sought after items, specifically as a result of the “retro gaming” trend. Nearly every ad featured some sort of mention of “retro gaming,” and prices for what I can only assume to be renowned models could range in the \$100s. I again thought of Tanner’s writing on nostalgia, specifically his reflections on the popularity of VHS tapes at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and how such out-of-use tech acts as a “mnemonic device that can elicit nostalgic feelings”.⁹⁵ Whether films on VHS or old games on Nintendo 64, the effect is the same and the same sense of control as that experienced by an amp collector is achieved (albeit, for a far smaller price).

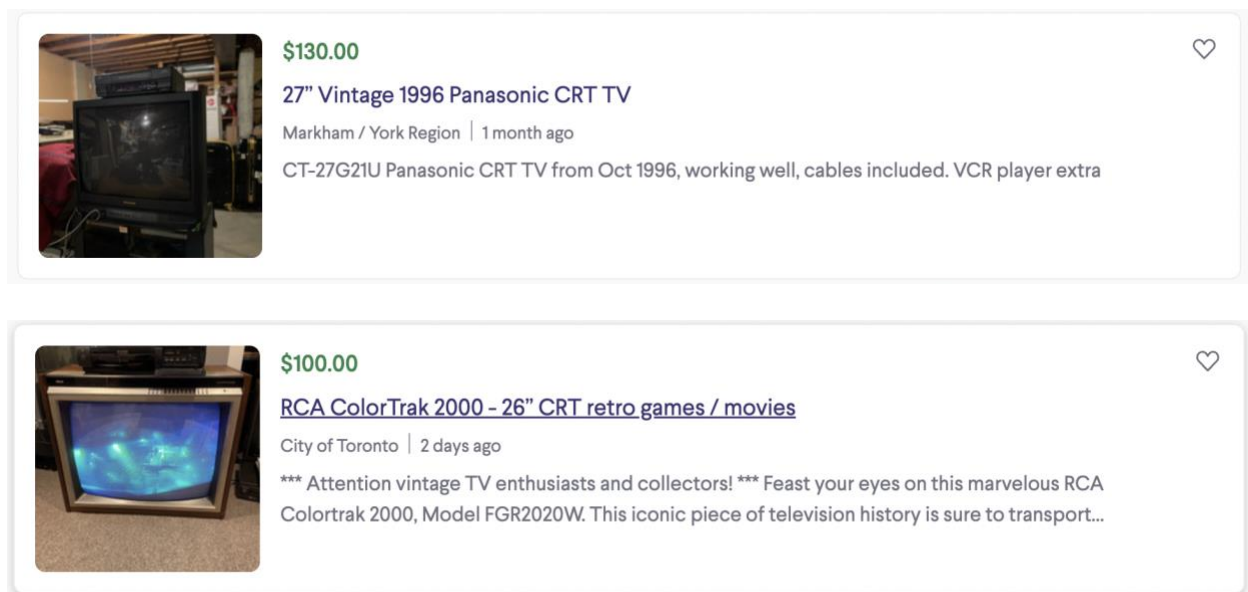


Figure 14. Screenshots of CRT television ads from Kijiji.

⁹⁵ Tanner, 130.

I draw attention to these physical manifestations of nostalgia⁹⁶ and regressions to the past to illustrate just how deeply the theme of feedback permeated my work. I found my material search was directly influenced by cultural trends which all had as their theme the return of the past into the present. As I will elaborate on below, exploring this sense of recursion and past/present interaction is a central part of my research and overall conceptual framework.

⁹⁶ A brief note on nostalgia: For many, the objects of nostalgia are items with which they interacted with as part of daily life in the past, hence the effect of regressing to an earlier stage in one's own life. However, these same objects end up becoming nostalgic for those born well after their obsolescence, for instance a young person today or in the future may find themselves nostalgic for all sorts of old technology. These, while never being a part of their lives, imply some inherited idealized version of history.

Cybernetic Feedback – Systems of Control

It is here that I wish to explore the conceptual and political use of feedback in this project. When discussing feedback, one must make the distinction between negative, in which feedback is used to keep a system in homeostasis, and positive (also referred to as runaway), where feedback causes a system to erupt into chaos and can provide new information and patterns. Essentially, negative feedback is used in systems of control to limit change, whereas positive feedback is that which expands and disrupts, introducing unexpected variables. My use of feedback in *Annihilation Symphony* is a reaction to the cybernetic systems and attitudes which have so thoroughly swallowed the society in which I live. I am here referring to the field of second-order cybernetics as pioneered by Norbert Wiener from the 1940s onwards, beginning with the wartime evolution of previous servomechanisms, such as the thermostat, into Wiener's anti-aircraft predictor system.⁹⁷ Wiener and other scientists would go on to develop cybernetics, the name of which is based on the Greek word for steersman, into a "new science of control mechanisms in which the exchange of information would play a central role",⁹⁸ which relies on negative feedback to create both mechanical and social control technologies.

In *The Ontology of the Enemy*, Peter Galison traces Wiener's growth from a wartime mathematician⁹⁹ into a philosopher of social relations and life itself. Galison details how the social/natural philosophy which would come out of cybernetics was inextricably tied to the

⁹⁷ Galison, 235.

⁹⁸ Galison, 232.

⁹⁹ I have often reflected on how I have referred to the initial work which brought me to this installation as my "pilot" project, and how I later learned through my research that Wiener's cybernetics found its birth in another sort of "pilot" (or pilot-oriented) project: that of killing enemy pilots through advanced anti-aircraft technology. Here I set out to utilize a feedback process to open new unpredictable possibilities for my art, whereas Wiener's job was to harness negative feedback to predict and destroy. I find the irony to be amusing.

science's wartime origin, asserting that the history and development of practices and ideas is inseparable from their later broader meaning.¹⁰⁰ He outlines how cybernetics came to become a totalizing worldview thusly:

In the air-ground battle, it was a short step for Wiener and Bigelow to take the pilot-as-servomechanism directly over into the AA gunner-as-servomechanism and thence to the operation of the heart and proprioceptive senses. From the body, it was us more generally – we humans – whose intentions could be seen as none other than self-correcting black-boxed entities and finally nature itself that came to be seen as a correlated and characteristic set of input and output signals.¹⁰¹

This weapons technology would go on to form the basis of rest of the field, informing the creation of computational technology and the internet.¹⁰² The only goal would be conquering uncertainty through the conceptualizing of all things as various systems in which information circulation would be critical to the maintenance of control.¹⁰³

Since the end of the Second World War, this cybernetic perspective has become near ubiquitous as of 2024. Post-war computation theorists, anthropologists and social scientists were all heavily influenced by Wiener's wartime theories.¹⁰⁴ Galison as well demonstrates cybernetics' link to systems theory and even draws a direct link between Wiener's work and the development of postmodernist thought.¹⁰⁵ The collective Tiqqun has dubbed the permeation of this worldview "the cybernetic hypothesis", stating:

¹⁰⁰ Galison, 264

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Tiqqun, 37-38.

¹⁰³ Tiqqun, 39-40.

¹⁰⁴ Galison, 257.

¹⁰⁵ Galison, 258.

The *cybernetic hypothesis* is thus a political hypothesis, a new fable that, beginning with the Second World War, had definitively supplanted the liberal hypothesis. Unlike the latter, it would have us think of biological, physical, and social behaviors as being integrally programmed and reprogrammable.¹⁰⁶

Here, all relations between human beings are interpreted through the wartime application of game theory and servomechanisms, where unknowable monads interact in a fundamentally antagonistic fashion.¹⁰⁷ Feedback is the core component of cybernetic functioning, allowing for the regulation and maintenance of the systems in which these monads exist.

¹⁰⁶ Tiqqun, 25.

¹⁰⁷ Galison, 264-265.

Cybernetics, Nostalgia, and Hauntology

Perhaps one of the most prominent current examples of cybernetic feedback in action can be found in the recommendation algorithms used by countless social media, streaming services, and search engines. It is also in this case that we see the feedback loop of the recommendation algorithm embodying the ideas of nostalgia and recurrence examined throughout this paper. Tanner describes how these algorithms, being fed on data from the past, as well as users' past choices, end up recommending either similar or identical results.¹⁰⁸ The algorithms are designed to operate under the assumption that what people already have consumed is all they will want to consume in the future, with the goal not of predicting or really recommending, but of avowing.¹⁰⁹ The cybernetic simplification of human beings leads to the use of over-simplified models upon which the recommendation systems base predictions on – results become homogenized based on parameters set by the algorithm and thus real people start to mimic their models simply from lack of exposure to anything else.¹¹⁰ Both corporations and governments increasingly rely on these algorithms to make optimized “data-informed” decisions, from national security to Instagram posts, always with the goal of cybernetically predicting the Other. The result of this calculated risk management is that negative feedback loops of content, narratives, and information are formed.

In a disastrous manifestation of the cybernetic hypothesis, an ever-increasing number of decision-making processes and forms of content curation are being delegated to such algorithmic

¹⁰⁸ Tanner, 168-169.

¹⁰⁹ Tanner, 169.

¹¹⁰ Tanner, 170.

systems. The use of past data to inform predictions of the future fails to foresee new developments or adapt for new conditions, instead they, as Tanner writes, “just make certain pasts repeatedly go viral”.¹¹¹ “Certain” is the key word, as the versions of the past which are served up in this loop are nearly always those which are idealized or match official histories and the narratives of dominant groups in society.¹¹² The stories that are repeated in these algorithmic feedback systems are not ones of emancipatory struggles, radical politics, or ways of being outside the status quo. The critical importance of this marginalization of narratives cannot be under-stressed, for as Thomas King said in his 2003 CBC Massey Lecture *The Truth About Stories*, “The truth about stories is that’s all we are”.¹¹³ When the only stories we have are those fed to us by a vast array of cybernetic control technologies, whose only purpose is to maintain the system as it is, the possibilities for change and growth become slim.

Annihilation Symphony instead utilizes the opposite, positive feedback, as its basis. I feel this form of a runaway loop symbolizes the potential for a radical nostalgia, drawing from Mark Fisher’s conceptualizing of hauntology, those “lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate”.¹¹⁴ Instead of using nostalgia within a negative feedback system, as the cybernetic algorithm does, where one is goaded to desire a past which no longer/never did exist, I propose a hauntological alternative predicated on the desire for the non-existent futures which those suppressed parts of the past promised. The history must be in a sense un-recuperated in this way, catalysts rediscovered and allowed to enter into runaway feedback with the present. I found many such lost futures in various 20th century used books I collect, particularly the compilation

¹¹¹ Tanner, 185.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ King, 153.

¹¹⁴ Fisher, 16.

of radical publications from the late 1960s assembled by Michell Goodman, *The Movement Toward a New America*. This tome is an anthology of various authors' coverages of topics including the workers' movement, the black power movement, radical feminism, indigenous rights organizing, the GI movement, community control of policing, queer liberation, and more.¹¹⁵ Reading these messages from the past now is a fascinating glimpse into what could have been, as well as an excellent counter narrative to the now endlessly marketable and canonized 1960s and 70s. It is these narratives along with the work and sacrifice of those involved in these struggles which must be resurrected. My use of nostalgic objects in this installation is expressly meant to introduce the past into the now and to perhaps redirect the nostalgic feelings conjured for a different purpose than comfort and control.

The "noise" which features so heavily in my project, both audio and visual, is meant to bring the viewer as close as possible to a visceral experience of positive feedback, to suggest to the body what the mind, caught up in the endless overlays of controlled thought, may not easily grasp. The rupturing of the sense of rational subjectivity through exposure to noise is intended to illustrate the inextricable link between the general noise of one's environment and one's own cognition and perception. Malaspina referred to this as the "contamination" of perception by "pre-conscious physiological and affective dispositions".¹¹⁶ In this respect, just as *Annihilation Symphony*'s amplifiers and televisions are used to draw attention to raw amplification and image-making themselves, so too does the overall experience of the installation aim to shift focus from, to quote Malaspina, "what is perceived, to the *act* of perception".¹¹⁷ This represents a

¹¹⁵ Goodman. Another fascinating read is Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture*, for its contemporary analysis of the rising cybernetic hypothesis in the 1960s. Roszak refers to this as "the technocracy".

¹¹⁶ Malaspina, 162.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. Emphasis author's.

fundamental challenge to the cybernetic hypothesis, showing the impossibility of absolute control and the undeniability of contingency:

Any philosophical enquiry into rationality, human agency, and collective self-determination must therefore arrive at an understanding also of the state of indecisions and confusion associated with noise – a state to which information and knowledge are temporary and always fragile solutions.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Malaspina, 168.

Contexts: Past and Present

As I draw to the conclusion of this paper, I feel it relevant to include a brief examination of *Annihilation Symphony* in the context of relational aesthetics, specifically to address the link between this movement, the above analyzed work of Oiticica, and my own project. In his book *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud describes the essence of the movement: “Art was intended to prepare and announce a future world: today it is modelling possible universes”.¹¹⁹ He goes on to define relation art as “A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space”.¹²⁰ In this respect, some may view Oiticica’s work as a sort of precursor to relational aesthetics, especially given that the artist intended for his *Cosmococas* to act as a conduit for the experience of what he called “crelazer” (or creleisure). This crelazer was essentially Oiticica’s idea of unalienated leisure, what he described as “a structure of leisure as pleasure as opposed to the current one of leisure as the programmed desublimation that sustains hour-periods of alienated work-production”,¹²¹ and was heavily informed by the writings of Herbert Marcuse.¹²² With this in mind one could argue that Oiticica was doing the very thing Bourriaud proposed the artists of the 90s were doing, “modelling possible universes”¹²³ and working directly with human relations. Going deeper and understanding what Oiticica actually intended with his work, however, I believe refutes this appearance. One could also assert that

¹¹⁹ Bourriaud, 13.

¹²⁰ Bourriaud, 113.

¹²¹ Basualdo et al., 47.

¹²² For more about Oiticica’s crelazer, see Skrebowski’s *Revolution in the Aesthetic Revolution: Hélio Oiticica and the Concept of Creleisure*.

¹²³ Bourriaud, 13.

Annihilation Symphony is an experiment in relational aesthetics, but this would not be wholly correct either for similar reasons.

Oiticica's own words attest to what I believe is the fundamental difference between his style of work and relational aesthetics. First, Oiticica hated and rejected his own associations with conceptual and similar art styles.¹²⁴ He did not view his project as having any associations with these art trends and actively shunned the New York mainstream art world,¹²⁵ whereas the art under the relational aesthetics umbrella typically embraced these institutional spaces. Relational art has been criticized for perpetuating the gallery system (the white cube) and upholding these traditionally conservative environments through a de-politicized "modelling [of] possible universes".¹²⁶ While Oiticica's work was meant to create spaces for the experience of different states of being, it was not his intention to have his project end there. He was very much the opposite of an apolitical proposer of practices, always leveling criticism at his contemporaries for their lack of revolutionary vigor, stating: "I don't know what is going on here, but there is such a bourgeois art scene, conformity and reactionarism going on, unbelievable",¹²⁷ and: "I am just fed up with revolutionary things being said in academic ways ... how can I take any pseudo-revolutionary orthodox bullshit?".¹²⁸ I would imagine Oiticica's response to Bourriaud's modelers of universes would be akin to this quotation: "they should... learn about real guerilla warfare... not even Guevara's lessons have been absorbed".¹²⁹ Oiticica

¹²⁴ Skrebowski, 68. Oiticica: "I detest conceptual art, I have nothing to do with conceptual art. On the contrary, my work is something concrete, as such."

¹²⁵ Skrebowski, 74.

¹²⁶ Bourriaud, 13.

¹²⁷ Skrebowski, 74.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

modelled his project on Guevara's *foquismo* strategy with the direct aim to foment revolutionary conditions;¹³⁰ he created his *Cosmococas* in secret, with it never being publicly shown until 20 years after his death.¹³¹ I believe this is Oiticica's ultimate legacy, one quite opposed to his current position in the canon as an often misread "hippie modernist"¹³² or relational art forerunner.

In the making of *Annihilation Symphony*, I was directly inspired by my research into Oiticica's life and work, perhaps more so than any other artist. I imagine a historical feedback cycle wherein my practice is simply another iteration of the loop carried forward by such figures. However, here I must address what I view as the fundamental contextual shifts informing my practice which have occurred since Oiticica's time, and even the heyday of relational art: the ways in which the feedback system has changed. For one, despite my politics and ultimate desires for a better world, I do not have any illusions of radicality or revolution in my art practice. It is a project conceived within a graduate degree program at a major educational institution, as far as one can be from Oiticica's underground hidden experiments. Simultaneously, I do see this work as political, and it should be perceived as such.

The cybernetic world we now live in has created such a complex system of control, what Deleuze would call "the coils of a serpent",¹³³ that ways of true resistance are difficult to find and often quickly recuperated. The lengths to which spectacular recuperation has enveloped so many once transgressive elements is morbidly impressive. Oiticica's cocaine-covered celebrities

¹³⁰ Skrebowski, 73.

¹³¹ Butler, 128.

¹³² See Terranova's *Dropping Out Is Impossible in a Cybernetic World: Hippie Modernism at the Walker Art Center*.

¹³³ Deleuze, 7.

seem quaint now. Guevara's image has long been a cliché, and the radical writings found in Goodman's *The Movement Toward a New America* exist now as social media infographics or sanitized corporate marketing campaigns. I think of the final sections of Tiqqun's *Cybernetic Hypothesis*, McKenzie Wark's analysis in *Capital is Dead*, and Byung-Chul Han's closing "Idiotism" chapter in *Psychopolitics*. These all suggest to me a slowness, unintelligibility, and opacity as forms of resistance in the face of the cybernetic demand for quick and transparent information. With *Annihilation Symphony*, I can aim to offer a space for slow experience, where noise can live, where the body can regain a sense of itself. I can also offer a work which is directly confrontational to the space it inhabits through its use of sound volume. Sound bleeds, leeches, and echoes in uncontrollable ways; it causes disruptions which may have legal ramifications. As a result, this work simply cannot exist in certain contexts at the moment. Time will tell if the excess noise can be recuperated too.

In relation to my work, I ponder the question of what is gained and what is lost as past methods and ideas are transposed to the present. While grieving the lost futures of the past, important insights into the present and the shaping of the coming future can be gained. Analysis of how recuperation works, what resisted longest, and which histories are left out can provide key insights into creating both an artistic and political project for the current day. Today we must grapple with the cybernetic world in which we live, navigating the gifts of access (to both knowledge and materials) with the hyper-capitalist reality and fascistic undertones of control prevalent in nearly all things. The revolutionary ideation of the 60s and 70s was traded in for the acceptance of history's end in the 90s, and of course art reflected this. Now I see perhaps a reversal, a coming around of the cycle? As trite of a statement as it is, history has not ended and

will continue to not end, and one cannot continue to operate under the 2000s era assumption that this is so. The task is to enmesh oneself fully in the historical current and to determine how lost legacies can return to fulfill their promises. There is no time left to model universes.

Conclusion

I see this project as another cycle of the feedback loop carried forward by artists before me. It is an attempt to continue the opposition to cybernetic domination through the creation of spaces where another way of being might be felt. I hope that it will serve this role in the cycle and carry forward these intentions for others to pick up, as the ever-shifting nature of these diffuse systems of control requires a similarly liquid response. For myself, I plan to continue to display *Annihilation Symphony* in alternate configurations and contexts and feel that this project has given me a new direction for my artistic work as I leave graduate school.

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