Tron Lennon discuss Collaborative Practice:

Tron Lennon represents the collaborative work of John Ferguson and Paul Bell. Exploring beyond a paradigm where musicians perform pre-composed works, they celebrate spontaneity and the ephemeral nature of sound. As a guitarist and DJ they have spent four years extending their practice through free improvisation and live audio-visual experimentation. In exploring indeterminate and dysfunctional systems alongside more direct causal gestures, they embrace unpredictability as a strategy to probe, provoke and generate creative response.

We have diverse 'performance ecologies' [1] which consist of, on the one hand, turntable, sampler, hardware effect processors, and laptop, and on the other hand, electric guitar, modified electro-mechanical systems, hacked toys and other appropriated objects.

Paul's turntable-centric ecology deals exclusively with pre-existing audio visual materials. Embracing collage as a creative strategy he deconstructs and renegotiates at the turntable, placing these materials into new, live performance contexts. Through advances in DJ technology Paul integrates video into live performance. Using two turntables, he equips one with regular analogue-vinyl, and the other with time-coded vinyl, allowing him to manipulate digital audio and video inside Max/MSP/Jitter software. His practice could easily be considered a creative response to an increasingly mediatised world, a world in which recordings, be they musical or filmic, accost and saturate us daily. The result is a plunderphonic [2] aesthetic that surmounts the fixity of the source materials through physical intervention, putting agency back into that which we have lost through acousmatic listening and the act of recording, an attempt to make recordings live again. The guitar, due to its wearable nature, is at the centre of John's ecology, this is one element of a multi-faceted setup that includes assorted pedals, circuit-bent [3] keyboards and other paraphernalia. John uses Max/Jitter and live camera feeds, allowing performance gesture to intervene in pre-recorded and synthetically generated visual materials. Combined with other forms of analogue electronics: live soldering, breadboard patching or performing with shadows via light sensors, his application of wireless gaming technology foregrounds uncontrollability in interface design, querying the role of gesture and the legibility of its transmission. As part of an aesthetic that embraces both intentional and unintended activity, this explores the creative potential for unpredictability as a catalyst for interaction in live electronic music.

Originally intended as a playback device, the turntable has moved beyond its prescribed functionality and can now be considered an instrument in its own right, allowing one to 'feel' sound and video with the hand. Taking his experiences as a Hip-hop DJ/producer (a cultural form that began through making live music out of recordings) and free improviser (an explicitly non-commercial form founded on presence in the here and now) as tools for very different sorts of cultural production, Paul brings them together to develop ways that recorded material can be used in spontaneous music making, problematising and moving beyond the contradictions such a move appears to entail. The notion of 'live' is problematic to Paul's practice predicated, as it is, on the reuse of recordings. Live is considered the antithesis of recording, full of life and replete with real-time interaction that is lacking in the fixity of dead recorded objects. However, this is not entirely the case because technologies of reproduction have permeated contemporary culture to a point where they are 'embedded within the language of live performance itself.' [4] As a result the live mimics the

mediatised, a sentiment affirmed through the status afforded to DJs in a culture that celebrates the playback of recordings.

Paul intervenes in recordings by manipulating and modifying their playback using techniques he developed while studying hip hop DJ practice, like Cutting, Scratching and Needle Dropping. [5] This is presented alongside more experimental, intuitively-gestural approaches where the turntable is explored and treated like an intimate 'sound object'. Pre-existing materials encourage unpredictable encounters when detached from their original contexts and juxtaposed with other materials from a plethora of genres. This can lead to exciting, dialogic exchanges between improvisers as they battle to interpret and evaluate the creative moment. Employing indeterminate techniques and selecting materials at random is a challenge to both himself and other performers because it is uncertain what sound will be made. For example, introducing raw, unmediated material, such as a chunk of Frank Sinatra or Paco Pena, can elicit unforeseen responses, serving to extend and broaden dialogue. For Paul, improvisation with recordings

is a means of investing agency into the commodity form as a way to satisfy creative desire.

John is interested in interfaces that maintain high levels of tactility. In serving up moments of resistance to direct causal action, interfaces that foster unpredictability can allude to a perception of autonomy that is essentially dialogic. This could be due to functional ambiguity or levels of physical sensitivity that lie at the edge of, or beyond human control. Interfaces like Nintendo's Wiimote make direct and legible transmission of gesture relatively straightforward, but how else might we engage? This apparatus can be setup to tap into the complexities of gesture beyond simple trigger recognition, magnifying accidental, unintended and uncontrollable movements, resulting in a highly tactile, but challenging system. From legible gesture transmission (the marriage of physical and acousmatic gesture) to the logical opposite where legible transmission is inverted, perhaps in the form of a reversed or resistive controller where silence is only reach-

able through intense physical activity, John always aims to devise systems that remain essentially 'playable' but with enough surprises to facilitate sustained engagement.
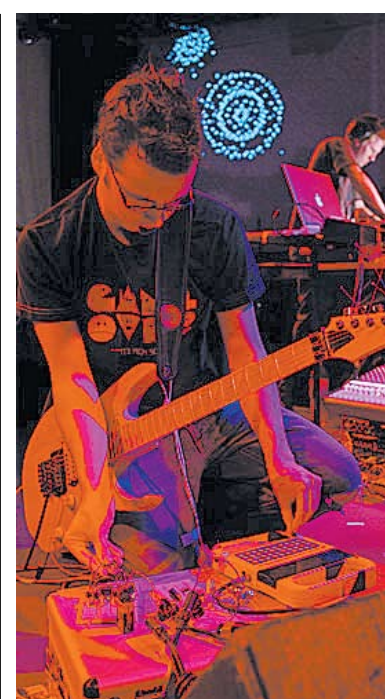
Through modification and redesign (Hacking) it is possible to extend capability beyond presupposed notions of usage and access inherent functionality that was previously masked or at least unheard. Circuit-bending or 'the art of the creative short circuit' [6] is an open ended practice grounded in the intuitive exploration of battery powered electronic devices. Seeking out hidden potentials within the apparent fixity of pre-existing circuitry pries open a closed system (No user serviceable parts inside!) of commodity fetishisation, exposing a rich plethora of materials ready for creative re-articulation. Using trial and error to discover additional connections across a circuit, then adding switches or body contacts to be bridged with human skin facilitates the move from child's 'toy' to 'performable instrument'. For example the Speak and Spell, [7] is a toy that is notorious for its 'bendablilty' and is much valued for its unpredictability within

John's ecology. When modified the function of the keypad can change dramatically depending on at which point in the programme the various switches are activated, the body contacts respond to the area of skin placed in contact and can be controlled by pressure, so the amount of electricity that leaves the circuit and flows through the body depends on how one touches it, resulting in an unpredictable but tactile controller that greatly amplifies any variation in pressure. By flicking a switch John is able to 'grab' and tune loop points, producing fuzzy, sporadic pulses, indeterminate rhythms and organically-evolving, punctuated textures, the instrument becomes particularly unpredictable when on the verge of a crash. Responding to the unpredictability inherent in these musical systems allows one to probe beyond learnt modes of gestural causality towards new levels of spontaneity. For John, notions of ambiguity are of equal importance to physical tactility when considering interface design.

Improvisation demands spontaneous

interaction that is very much predicated on being in the moment. Generally, in our performance ecologies both the proximity of objects to the body and the layout of equipment are paramount. Primary causation and somatic intelligence are predicated on speed of access and the ability to (re)interpret. The physicality of moving around an ecology where everything is reachable and able to be reconfigured at arms length allows for varied creative potential and is a defining feature of what we do, the ability to restructure is vital. 'This isn't working, what else might I do?' Embracing this challenge can demand an immediacy of response that is familiar to any improviser. Whether moving from an expression where there is direct correlation between input gesture and resultant sound to something more uncontrolled, or changing from textual accompaniment to something much more confrontational, the instruments(s) with which we engage must be highly tactile. For example, in September 2005 we developed a piece called *Fluid* [see centre image]. This involved pouring water between two large aluminium flower pots, the thin and highly resonant construction amplified the transfer of water allowing one to shape the sound, and in turn, elicit musical expression. The rules of the exchange were simple: take one step and pour. This real-time negotiation afforded no time to think, for once the transfer was complete it was then the responsibility of the person who had just finished pouring to scramble into a receiving position to catch the water before it hit the floor. The physical complexity of this interaction made no one moment repeatable, bringing a sense of discovery with every move.

When improvising, we believe that we are not simply dealing with physical reflex. Gestures may arrive as something of a surprise and feel alien to us but only because our cognitive processes happen so fast that we are not aware of them until they emerge as somatic output. A performer on the receiving end may not realise that an emerging sound was unintentional, or that a gesture happened by accident, however, they will respond to it nonetheless. Practices that investigate discovery led processes through open-ended renegotiation of fixed, commodity forms, such as the Sampling and Hacking aesthetics that we both embrace, continue to provide new potentials for creative expression. In Tron Lennon music emerges from three way interaction; from the spontaneous communication between John and Paul, their individual interactions with the singularities of their instruments, and the seemingly autonomous nature of their chosen materials. The specificity of their individual aesthetics causes contradiction within their collaborative practice, often leading to antagonistic modes of engagement. This is laid bare in every performance where dialogue can appear both cohesive and broken. Through improvisation and real-time music making, Tron Lennon therefore seek to uncover hidden and unintended potentials in seemingly fixed media, exposing instability, contradiction and new roles for the live musician.

[1]   A term used by John Bowers to describe the arena for activity created by a musician in his immediate surroundings at Music and Machines III, a two-day conference organised by the International Centre for Music Studies (ICMuS) and Culture Lab exploring the emerging/emergent relationships between music/sound art and machines under the impact of digital systems, 15 December – 16 December 2005, Newcastle University, England, http://www.ncl.ac.uk/culturelab/events/item/mm5

[2]   A term coined by John Oswald in 1985 in an essay entitled Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative.

[3]   For example see, R. Ghazala, 'Circuit-Bending: build your own alien instruments' (Indiana: Wiley, 2005).

[4]   P. Auslander, Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture (London: Routledge, 1999) p, 40.

[5]   A technique that involves dropping a stylus on a vinyl record as it plays on a turntable.

[6]   R. Ghazala, 'Circuit-Bending: build your own alien instruments' (Indiana:Wiley, 2005).

[7]   An educational toy for children produced in the 1970s by Texas Instruments.