

Instrument Environments

Andrea Neumann in conversation with Rama Gottfried

“The work of Andrea Neumann has always been very inspiring for me, the way that she sets up different situations of interaction in her instrumental/object system, where each element seems to have a real character development aspect to it. So when we were thinking of people to speak to on the topic of agency, I thought of her work right away. The following interview took place at her studio in Berlin, sitting next to her “inside-piano” setup.” (Rama Gottfried)

Array: Could you give us an overview of your instrument?

Neumann: I would say the core of the instrument, or the inner life, is actually the piano frame, with the strings. Instead of the usual heavy metal frame, it is made of aluminum, and so it’s smaller, with fewer strings, and also shorter strings, but it’s all strings. With two separate damper pedals, one for the lower strings and one for the higher strings. I think I would call this section the most “acoustic” part, even though it is of course also amplified, but I can play it

in a way that you can hear acoustically. Sometimes it sounds a little bit like a guitar, but I would say it sounds like a piano.

I also needed a space to put my other objects and preparations, and so the builder, Bernd Bittmann, added this metal plate that I can use as a table space, to arrange the preparations before using them. The metal plate section is somewhere between an acoustic and electronic sound.

For the preparations, I sometimes use a spring, or a clothespin that I can bow, which gets amplified by the contact microphone mounted on the metal plate, and on the metal plate I also have different types of surfaces attached (sand paper and cloth) that sound all different. I found that amplifying this metal plate section of the instrument gives another flavor, another sound quality to it, much more metallic. Often I play these surfaces with brushes, or steel-wool, or with a metal-tongue.

And then I have the whole mixer area that is purely electronic. I developed an approach to control mixer feedback that I discovered by mistake. I once put a wrong connection, and then all of sudden I had this [*plays a heavy percussive sound*]; and then I figured out how to play with it.

All these different sections, or areas, run through the mixing board. The acoustic sections have a pickup. There's a pickup at the resonance frame, there's a pickup on the metal plate, and I also have a guitar pickup that goes on the strings.

What is really beautiful is to combine all these sections with the electronic sounds. With these four pickups that I use, all of them connect with the electronic sounds, so these worlds can be connected. And I can also decide how much. Sometimes the strings can sound really distorted like an electric guitar, and also the metal plate sounds can get really noisy. So there is a possibility between really big noises, or drones, and really fragile sounding acoustic little string sounds.

Talking about the preparations: I think I was looking a lot for preparations that would sound alone. So I have these magnets that can play on the strings, and then *[places a stack of magnets on strings and sets them in motion, creating a tremolo sounds, as the magnets wobble back and forth; then turns up the gain on the mixer, which amplifies the lower resonances of the string]*.

It can sound for quite a while, but also not too long. And when I put them here on the bridge, they sound

all of a sudden like *[plays drier, percussive version of the sound, with a plate reverb trail, increasing in speed until it becomes a pitch]*.

Array: Would you say that this idea of agency is mostly related to the autonomy of the preparations? But then you also have the amplified network system,...

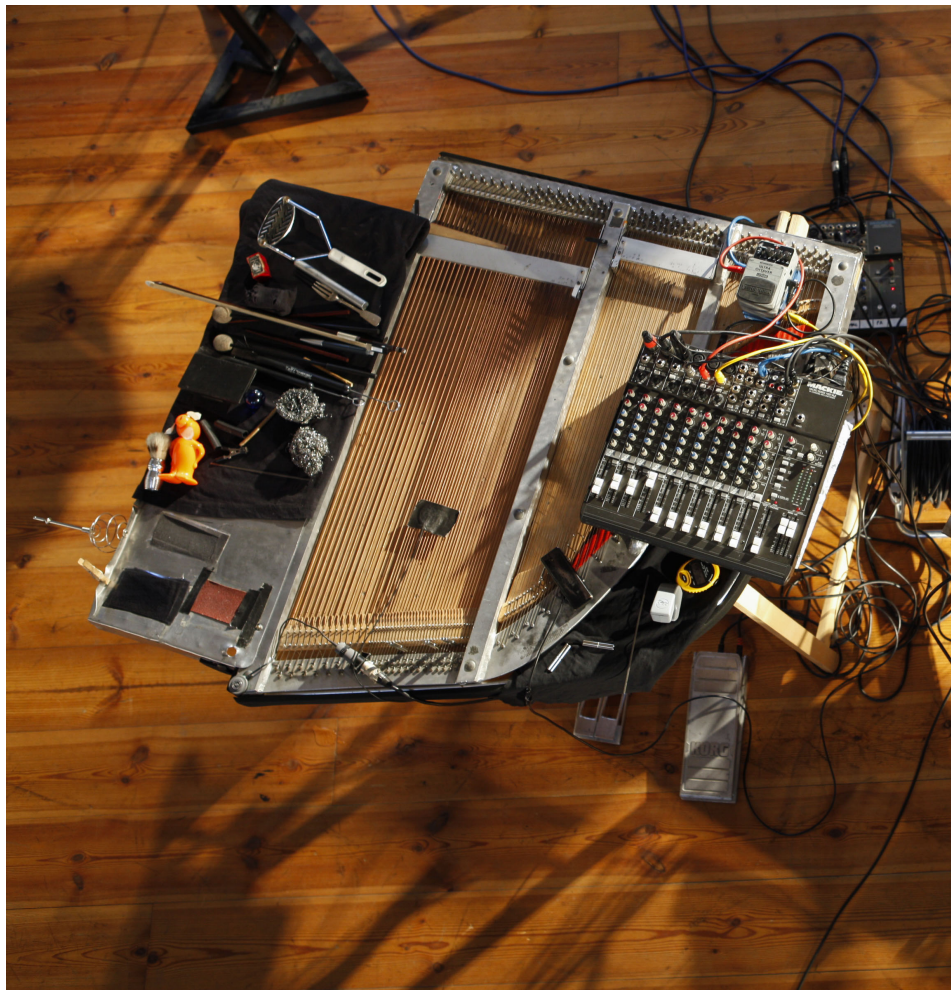
Neumann: There's agency everywhere. For example: I have these percussion brushes, and when you use them for playing the strings, when you want to have a certain intense string sound, you press the brushes so they go around the strings. Shall I also play it for you?

Array: Sure!

Neumann: *[Plays intense, perforated scraping sound, strongly pressing the brush strands into the strings, with the brush oriented vertically, and the brush strands mostly pulled into the handle part, so only a short section of the brush is extended]*

It's different from when you do it this way... *[plays the same brush but lightly, in a more horizontal gesture along the string]*.

But eventually, the brush strands



Andrea Neumann's instrument. Photographer: Anja Weber.

ended up getting very chaotic; almost broken, or crushed, from the pressure on the string; so now I can't open and close the brushes anymore. And this led me to get a new set of brushes, which I discovered have a different sort of quality [*picks up a new set of brushes*]. I was never interested at first, but then I found that when I push the brush strands out completely, and I go onto the metal plate ... [*plays fully extended strands of the brushes on the metal plate, amplified with contact mics, which picks up the resonance of the brushes' metal strands*].

Array: Beautiful.

Neumann: It's almost like a pitch right?

Array: Right! like a bell...

Neumann: Yeah. So, I don't know if it's "agency," but I discovered this only because the other brushes broke.

Array: Right. I am also seeing these different kinds of resonances at play, which by nature are a type of interaction between the form of the object and the excitation method; plus the amplification, which has its own set of affordances...

Neumann: Yes, but also ...
[*suddenly sets a spring mounted to the metal plate into motion which plays a long resonant texture*].

Array: Ah, right, the springs have a kind of resonant autonomy...

Neumann: [*Bows on wooden clothes-pin mounted on metal plate*]
These are also resonant in their own way, but very noise-based. There is a little bit of pitch in it, but, yeah... Maybe I'll show you the way the feedback works.

Array: Yes please!

Neumann: [*starts improvising with distorted a mixer-feedback system, with input from various other microphones on the system*].

Array: Ah! Cool, I always wondered how you got that distortion sound, so it's actually mixer feedback.

Neumann: And also other people can enter the system. When playing into open channels, for example if you have a trumpet playing, it will influence the distortion.

This situation is really cool, because of the networking and hybridization.

Even other people outside of the instrument will be part of it. And I have to say, they enjoy it a lot when they feel they can influence the way the sounds develop. And I enjoy this a lot as well. I don't have to do anything, I just say, *[with an inviting gesture to other imaginary performers]*, "ok please" ...

Sometimes even when you talk it makes sudden vocal sounds that alter the feedback pattern.

[The system starts distorting when she speaks] What I really like too, is a setting that only has an effect from time to time, or just when I do something like playing short gestures on the strings, that trigger the feedback in short burst and then becomes silent.

This is so alive, right? *[gestures for me to say something]*

Array: Yes! *[No distortion on my voice]* Hmm...

Neumann: *[System distorting whenever she speaks]* Louder,... you have to speak louder!

Array: Ah! *[No distortion on the voice]* I think it only listens to you. It's your pet.

Neumann: No... *[Distorting]*
Louder! you have to speak louder!

Array: *[Loudly and distorting in the system]* OK I'LL SPEAK LOUDER.

Neumann *[laughs]*

Array: Cool, so it's this network, and there all these different actors, some of them you are setting into motion, some are other people in the room, and you have all these things that are going into the mixer, and... well, it's a network, or an environment?

Neumann: Yeah, true. I think this is very nice, that other people, musicians in the room can be, I mean it's not forcing, but they can be part of this environment. It's connecting, not only by playing musicians that are connected by playing music together, but in an acoustical way, there are interactions, and that is really nice.

Array: How would you summarize your approach to this idea of agency within your work?

Neumann: As a general pattern in my practice? Maybe, "to put things into motion." Putting things into mo-

tion – which doesn't necessarily mean producing sound – and letting each element have their own motions. This can happen on completely different levels. It happens between my finger and the strings, but also between me and this feather that will just walk alone, or this fork. It happens between mixer and instrument, and it happens between other musicians who are triggering some mixer sounds, and it also happens between movements and sounds, and when I compose for other people too: it's also a way to put things into motion. To embrace the interferences that happen; to be open to the interferences that happen; maybe this is a way of discovering environments, or elements of the world, and welcoming the qualities of what happens in these relationships. There's something quite essential in that. When things get into vibration and something unexpected emerges, this is maybe one of the most beautiful things that can happen. It's interesting to see how this can happen, with all of these details, and all these different ways of producing sound and movement.