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interview: MSHR

Analog roars and laser-sharp lattices make up the strange geometries of MSHR, a collaboration between New York-based artists Brenna Murphy and Birch Cooper. The two have channeled their virtual sculpture practices into transcendent sound and visual performances featuring custom-built, light-activated synthesizers. An evening with the duo occupies the full sensory field of the audience: the artists manipulate sound using the physical movement of their bodies, while light bulbs and strobes illuminate fractal-like sculptures and the occasional object from nature. Both intimate and immersive, their work engages the expansive systems that bind geometry with ecology, ceremony with psychedelia, cybernetics with seashells. After seeing MSHR at Chicago's Graham Foundation for the performance series *Lampo*, we spoke with Brenna and Birch about systems, sculptures, and synthesizers—fittingly, over a glitchy Internet connection.

You are musicians, sculptors, performers, craftspeople, and technicians. How do you negotiate these different roles?

BC: Our practice feels very rhizomatic, in that the different techniques and approaches that we use have to rise up at the same time to produce what we're trying to make. As the people doing that, we are constantly working between all these different forms.

BM: It doesn't feel like a real separation between mediums. They're all very combined. We can't really think about doing one without the other. For instance, the electronics have to go inside the sculpture, so we have to think about both at once.

BC: And our sculpture is totally informed by electronic music, and our electronic music is totally informed by virtual sculpture on a more abstract level.

Your work has both geometries of sound and visual geometries. Is that something you actively think about when creating form both physically and sonically?

BM: Yeah, totally. Finding forms across dimensions is what it's all about.

You started as a part of a collective. How did the collaboration between the two of you come about?

BC: That's true. For four years we were in a collective together with five people. We all lived in a house together, except one member. That worked really well, because he was kind of the enzyme, so that we didn't have to be constantly working on our project. Only when he came over would it be switched on.

BM: The group was called Oregon Painting Society, and we were completely collaborative. We brought a lot of different talents together and mashed them together. When that ended, and Birch and I started MSHR, we grew out of that mentality of combining everything we do.

BC: We wanted to keep working across as many disciplines as we could, and continue doing the kind of radical collaboration an art collective does, even though there are only two of us. It's still that spirit.

How did you arrive at the technologies that you use? Was it part of your individual practices that you brought together, or did it develop out of the collaboration?

BC: It began with our individual practices. Brenna is the one who brought virtual sculpture to our collaboration, and I brought synthesizer building to our collaboration. Since then, we've meshed our skill sets and have tried to learn as much about the mediums that we're working in as possible.

Do you constantly incorporate new technologies and equipment? Do you teach yourself new techniques?

BC: We try to learn new technologies as much as possible. It's obviously sometimes a really slow process. We've taught ourselves pretty much everything, although we love learning from other people too, when possible.

BM: We learn from books and tutorials.

How do you think about the role of the technology in your work? Is it to facilitate an experience of the work, or is the work an exploration of the limits of that technology itself?

BC: I think it's both at different points.

BM: All art relies on technology at some form. We are very aware of the tools that we're using. We're also building tools. The tools themselves are an art piece, but we also use them to make other art.

BC: We try to be really intentional as much as possible about defining our own tools with the thought that that would result in maybe a more personal outcome.

BM: When we started this group we really had the urge to take things down to the fundamental level and build from there. It felt important to us to build our own instruments if we were going to make music, to get it down to

ground zero as much as possible.

BC: Of course, you can never really reach ground zero, but you just try for it.

work by MSHR

Image courtesy of MSHR.

You make physical objects, performances, and installations. In each case, there's a different relationship between the objects, the experience, and the audience, whether it's performer-audience, or the audience becoming participants in the installations. How do the objects or tools change between these different formats?

BC: We think about interfaces a lot in our work. My initial interest in building electronics was to make interactive musical installations, like physical scenarios that would be a score for a piece of electronic music. I didn't realize it at first, but interfaces became really important. How does a visitor to an installation engage with the sound? In our performance work, we now think of it as a series of systems with specific interfaces. When we compose a set, we think about arranging interfaces that we will perform with. In an interactive installation, it's really about the interface, because there is so much poetry in how someone interacts with a system.

BM: And making an object obvious as to how it's supposed to be interacted with, so that someone just coming into the installation can understand that they are supposed to pick up this thing, or whatever the case is.

Chance must be very important when you're letting other people interact with your objects. Is there also a chance aspect of the performances?

BC: Absolutely. We're totally into chance.

BM: It's about a balance of creating a set of parameters around a situation that allows for an exciting amount of chance, but not so much that it's out of bounds.

BC: In our performances, we're working with a generative feedback system, so there's a pretty broad band of what can potentially come out of that. We're part of that feedback system, responding to it and guiding it. The fact that the outcome is not totally known is what makes it interesting for us.

The feedback between the two of you feels very symbiotic, and there's a physical element to your performances that feels almost like choreography or dance. How much of that is a negotiation on the spot?

BC: Within each interface, we've already chosen what the interface and sequence will be. Within those, it's very improvised.

BM: But we also perform frequently and we practice a lot, so we know generally how to dance with the system. We don't know exactly what sounds will happen or what will result, but we generally know the dance.

BC: We try to play as well as possible, whatever that means. I like the dance comparison. We both love dance a lot and would like to have it be a part of our practice.

I'm interested in the element of physicality in your work, both in the relationship between the two of you when you're performing, and also the way your instruments work.

BC: Well, the way the instruments work, there is kind of a physical proximity element, but basically it's brightness of light.

BM: The physical side comes in because we are moving the sculptures that have the sensors in them, and we're moving the light bulbs. That's why it appears to be a physical response to space, but it's actually how much light hits the sculpture.

BC: But it's obviously a physical array, and when you adjust that, it changes the system.

The idea of systems is so important to your work. Are you interested in systems theory as a field, or is it through the technology itself that you've come to think about systems?

BM: Both. We're really interested in cybernetics and systems theory, and it totally relates to our practice. But we're also just intuitively drawn to work with systems. We think of our relationship to systems as a collaboration with the system. It's an exciting way to make work because you are dancing with this entity that has its own mode.

BC: All composition uses some kind of system, but we're really interested in generative systems that use feedback. We find them really elegant and related to systems of nature.

MSHR

Photo by Walter Włodarczyk.

What's the negotiation between the technological and the natural in your work? You have a slick, maybe even futuristic aesthetic, but you also incorporate natural elements in your performances, like sticks and shells.

BC: Structurally, the types of feedback systems are really inspired by natural things. Ecosystems are something that we go back to a lot to describe a really complex generative system.

BM: Our experience of reality is really a flat combination of nature and technology. In our daily experience, we have relationships with trees and plants, but at the same time, there's a car right there, there's a computer right here. Both are such a presence in our daily lives, so it makes sense to use the palette of everything in our work.

BC: On a material level, we're very attracted to both types of materiality.

BM: There is an exciting dissonance that happens when you put them together in an obvious way, like sticking

electronics inside of a piece of wood. It has a really thrilling meshing.

BC: A lot of the natural elements we use, like shells, embody these types of structures that we're interested in, like infinite regression. They have really algorithmic forms.

BM: They're also just easy, readymade objects that we can put electronics inside. We don't have to build a box; we can just use a shell.

There is so much geometry and mathematics and, as you say, algorithms in your work, which is a very physical quality. But you've also described your performances as ceremonial, so there is a metaphysical aspect of it as well.

BM: We want to follow all aspects of our practice to their logical conclusions. Performance exists in our culture as a form of ecstatic group ceremony. We've kind of naturally pushed our performances in that direction, because it feels like the obvious role of that mode of art.

Is that so that they can engage social systems?

BM: Oftentimes when we're at a show, people come because they want to lose themselves and have a transcendent experience and be in a group together having an experience of sound or light together. We think about that when we're developing our performance.

BC: We are trying to take a more zoomed-out perspective on what we're doing when we have a musical show. When you go to see a house show where there's a hardcore band playing or something, that's this modern version of something that people have been doing different versions of for the entire history of humanity. We're trying to highlight that.

It was great to see your work at the Graham Foundation in Chicago. There was a very powerful exhibition up of photography of architecture in Baghdad, and I noticed a lot of feedback between the emotional and experiential intensity of both the work and of your performance. How much do you think about context when you're planning a performance or installation in a specific space?

BC: We play in a lot of different contexts, and it certainly does change the way the work is read. That's really exciting to us. We tour a lot, and on a tour we go through radically different contexts.

BM: Sometimes we'll play at a museum for a crowd that's mostly from a visual art background, and then maybe the next day we'll play in a basement at a punk house for the noise scene. Since our work is very visual and also audio, people can enter if from whichever way they have a background in. It allows us to play across different communities.

BC: And have some kind of communication to a fairly broad group of people.

Are you working on new installations or performances?

BM: We have a lot of installations coming up this year. Right now, we're workshoping a method for having them all feed each other instead of trying to spread ourselves thin.

BC: We have an installation coming up at the Museum of Art and Design in Manhattan.

BM: We'll have a whole floor of the museum to make an immersive sound sculpture, so it's going to be a large-scale endeavor. We're just working up to that through other installations leading up to it. In the past, we've had a number of different series of installations that we will restage throughout a year—different iterations of the same piece in different places. We're at the beginning of a new cycle. We did an installation a couple months ago through Harvestworks that is the beginning of this cycle, and now we're going to expand on that.

work by MSHR

Image courtesy of MSHR.

BC: It's an interesting tension from when you're still in a series, or when you mutate it so much that it's no longer the same series. There will be a few installations that we do this year that are outside the series that we're focusing on, which is great.

BM: Our performances and our installations really inform each other and help each other develop. It does depend a lot on tools and systems that we develop. Sometimes for an installation we'll come up with a new relationship between some aspects, and then we can incorporate that into our performance.

BC: Almost all the significant technological leaps that we've made in our performance work have originated in our installation work.

BM: The way we use light audio feedback, which is the middle section of our performance right now, originated as a sculptural piece: a light table that had all the lights underneath. On top we had the light sensors sliding over the surface. We came up with this light-audio system in a sculptural sense.

BC: The interface was sliding mirrored sensors along a 2D plane with a transparent print mediating the sensors. For our performances, we use a more three-dimensional version of that.

BM: We realized after we had done a few of these sculptural installations that we can take that same system and rethink its structure and use it as a performance tool.

So it's not just that the tools you're using are generative systems of sound or visuals, but also that the work is generative of other work. Do you think about your body of work as an organism building on itself, mutating as it goes?

BC: Totally. It's all about the process, going down this journey, keeping the energy high enough to keep on developing new ideas or new work.

Do you have specific influences or places you draw external ideas that drive the work?

BM: We are so influenced by the communities that we participate in. That's everything to us, because you make work in response to other people's works, or because you want to share with them. That feedback between us and our community is the real driving force.

BC: Absolutely. On a really basic level, [it's] the desire to participate in a dialog. We're very influenced by the different visual art and musical communities we're a part of.

BM: We travel and tour a lot, so our community is very spatially spread out.

BC: We really started thinking about our community as being post-geographic. Whenever we tour, we keep a catalog of the really cool scenes.

*an interactive MSHR installation at the Maison des Arts de Créteil in Créteil, France
Image courtesy of MSHR.*

Networks seem really influential, even down to the aesthetic of the early Internet in your work.

BM: Definitely. The Internet has been an important form of communication for us.

BC: Especially living in Portland, [Oregon,] where it's somewhat isolated in terms of travelers passing through. The Net Art movement was really important for us to participate in.

BM: I started participating in online art communities maybe ten years ago through Livejournal, pre-Tumblr. I made a lot of friends through that that felt really meaningful, because we were friends purely through images that we shared. That felt amazing. Since then, I've met a lot of those people, and nowadays I feel like it's a natural part of our lives and probably a lot of other people's lives to have friends that you keep up with on the Internet.

BC: It's been a really nice part of, on a personal note, my virtual sculpture practice. It's a really nice way to share what you're working on and remain active as a participant in a culture, even though you're actually just hiding in your bedroom.

The Internet developed from a techno-utopian space of sharing—which seems so central to your work—but maybe is moving toward being some other thing. How do you think about the state of technology now as influencing art and aesthetics, beyond being a means of communication?

BM: It's really important to be conscious of the frameworks that you're working within, whatever social media platforms you're using, realizing that someone designed those platforms and you are making your art through that and communicating with people through that. You need to be really conscious of the shapes that allowed for you to be creating that work. It's not a natural or given shape, it's something that someone designed, and it can be used as a controlling mechanism.

Is that part of your deconstructive impulse of breaking things down to their constituent parts, like making your own synthesizers?

BM: I wish the Internet was more Wild West. I think, as a human being, in reality it's important to deconstruct things, to try to see basic forms. That can help you to be more aware of how you're existing and how you can participate in the world. The Internet has become a very present form of existing. It's another space and you need to question what it is.

BC: We are very interested in the utopian side of it, too. We really like hard science fiction, particularly this writer Greg Egan, who describes civilizations of totally digital people. That's been a very inspirational thing to consider in our work, too, especially in regards to our virtual sculpture practice.

BM: Reading a lot of science fiction allows us to realize that imagination is powerful, and imagining possible ways of using technology and ways of forming civilizations is the first step toward creating those things.

Your work becomes almost a testing ground for imagination or speculation.

BM: Yeah. It's a way of putting things into the world that you want to see.

Interview by Nina Wexelblatt.

Photography by Rachel Veroff except when noted otherwise.

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