

bites



Janek Schaefer

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Table mannerist

London sound artist Janek Schaefer's explorations into 'weird audio' began when, as an architecture student at London's Royal College of Art, he was requested to submit an installation for an exhibition curated by Brian Eno. Gloriously unaware that Eno had once been a postman, Schaefer devised the idea of sending a package containing a voice activated tape recorder to the installation site which would record its own transit through the postal system. He called the piece "Recorded Delivery".

"The exhibition was being held in a self-storage centre," Schaefer says over the telephone on the eve of a tour of America. "We weren't allowed to visit the site, and being an architect I thought site specificity was an important aspect of installations. As I couldn't get any inspiration from being there, I thought about self-storage centres being all about people moving things, like boxes, around space. By sending the package to the site it would then become a site specific work."

The resultant recording — issued on limited edition post-office red 7" vinyl via Hot Air — focused Schaefer's mind on the production of sonic art. Having enjoyed some classical training as a youth (he was head

chorister at his school), he began to incorporate audio into his architectural investigations, involving himself in "lots of conceptual projects that inverted relationships with a built environment, such as bringing live sounds into buildings from outside through hidden microphones." A major catalyst for his sonic career came in the shape of a Royal College concert in 1995. It featured Pan Sonic, Chris Watson and, more significantly, Philip Jeck, who was performing his monumental piece *Vinyl Requiem* for 180 turntables.

"I was completely impressed with what Jeck had been doing," imparts Schaefer. "He had 180 of these junkyard, self-amplifying Dansette turntables all stacked up and playing at once. I didn't want to rip him off but I liked the idea, so I invented his idea of lots of turntables playing at once by making lots of record players in one."

Schaefer's Tri-Phonic turntable appeared in 1997, placing him immediately in the tradition of such avant garde turntablist mentors as Jeck, Christian Marclay and Otomo Yoshihide. A step up from the double-armed Technics deck of Cologne's Thomas Brinkmann, the Tri-Phonic features three tone arms located at inordinate points around the turntable, which allows it to perform astonishingly deft vinyl manipulations. Records can be played forwards or backwards, at any speed between 0-78 rpm, and can even play three records at once, though Schaefer admits that this last is something of an impractical gimmick.

"It's intended to be able to play an old piece of vinyl in any way possible to create totally new sounds from it," he explains. "It doesn't matter which way they face, as it depends on which way the vinyl is turning. Brinkmann uses his to make a lot of beat stuff, but I'm not into beats, I'm into textures and sounds. My main aim is to take something and change it into something new. Alteration is my main theme, so taking an old record and playing it slowly backwards, and then processing it and coming up with something new — that's the attraction for me."

After a glut of successful live performances, a poignant live recording, *Out* (issued on Belgian label K-raa-K in 1999), and a handful of extra-curricular projects recorded for Fat Cat, Rhiz and Diskono, Schaefer has recently decided to move away from his invented instrument. Of late, he's been exploring the studio more. Although he still employs vinyl manipulation techniques, he focuses more on the field recordings and electronics that have always been intrinsic in his work. His new album on Fat Cat, *Above Buildings*, is the best example of this new direction: a beautifully abstracted and intensely spatial assemblage that manipulates recordings sourced from aggressive electrical surges in Las Vegas, wheezy church organs and solar eclipses, merging them with locked grooves and crepuscular electronics to create a work that magnifies physical space and buzzes and crackles with extraordinary energy. "I went on a big holiday earlier in the year to North America, Brazil and Mexico and did lots of mindisc recording," he reveals. "A lot of the sounds on the album are good manipulations of those original sources. I always purely worked live when I started, but in the studio I create sounds and mix them in. I don't want to be known for just doing the work with the Tri-Phonic and kept in that 'turntablist' pigeonhole. I'm interested in just being a good musician and sound artist."

To this end, Schaefer is also planning an album with fellow architect Robert Hampson for their electroacoustic project Comae (to be released on Viennese imprint Rhiz). In addition he is working with Philip Jeck on an album that will explore more fully a process he began recently with his *Wow* single, released on Diskono. After drilling a hole off-centre in some test-tone vinyl to produce 'wow' (the wobbling sound that so many turntable manufacturers have spent years trying to eliminate), Schaefer then combined this with sinewave fluctuations and other material to make a bitter-sweet collage. "The LP I'm doing with Philip is using the same technique but with locked grooves," he explains, "we will drill several holes and get different axes for the lathe so that they'll overcut each other — they'll be locked grooves that will weave together. We'll also be cutting incomplete arcs so that instead of cutting 360 degrees it'll go for 90 degrees and then 'hit land' before wavering off to find another groove. In effect it'll be the record and turntable doing the composition." **PAUL SULLIVAN**
Above Buildings is out now on Fat Cat