

Sean Kerr - *Stacker*

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Catalogue essay by Mitchell Whitelaw

The voltage fluctuates in the wire, induces a field in the copper coil, moves the magnet inside the coil, moves the cone, the air. The speaker is a prime electro/magnetic/mechanical nexus. Where the sound happens, where everything that's come before, upstream, gets reconstituted, remade, projected. It's where the imperceptible surfaces.

The speaker has a face, which is almost all mouth (hence the name). It's turned towards us, pointed at our faces, ears, sensitive surfaces. Speaks to us; we make it speak to us; we speak to ourselves through it. The speaker is a part-subject, an inert industrial object pinned into speaking, facing us; it's a kind of face for industrial culture.

In its morphology the speaker is a multiplication of mouths and other orifices. In engineering terms, the task of sound-projection is broken down, distributed, allocated to specialised units (the bass driver, the midrange driver, the tweeter). In terms of faciality it's a cluster of mouths and eyes. This "face" is made more plausible because of its self-evident functionality. This orifice is shaped like so because its job is to project sound. These eyelashes are an adaptation to protect my delicate lenses. This tweeter is a hard dome faced with silk. This bass driver is surrounded by a flexible seal. This hole, vanishing back into the cabinet, allows the lowest frequencies to escape. Often the speaker face is covered with a screen or grille; a presentable surface, politely concealing the mouths. It is most often removable; hide-and-seek, the sound emanating from a blank cloth box — no, there it is, the cone underneath. I once had a pair of speakers with a heavy timber-veneer grille, glued on to the cabinet. I chiselled the grille off, leaving a row of broken stumps, trying to improve the sound.

The speaker is never just a sound-projector or a functional mouth-face. Its surface is never artless. It's a produced face, an engineered and designed face, a made-up face. It makes a visual display of its engineering: the bass driver is yellow, because it's woven out of kevlar. Where the technology is less visible the speaker sometimes labels itself, explaining: fourth-order crossover, ferrofluid cooled tweeter, DynaBass, Enhanced Stereo, Honeycomb Disc. And all this is absorbed into the industrial-designed object, which adds its own layers of ornament and artefact: brushed aluminium faceplates, logos, frequency graphs, bevelled corners, exotic timber veneers, white driver cones, organically-sculpted ports, gold-flecked synthetic-woven covers. The functional, the fake-functional and the cosmetic become indistinguishable. Sound production and image-production blend.

The pseudo-technologies of the speaker flourish because its operation is so hard to pin down. That transformation of signal into moving air brings into play the spatial mysteries of acoustics, physical dynamics of materials, electromagnetics. The endpoint of this engineering is literally impossible to grasp: the dynamics of projected sound are subtle, complex, environmentally contingent. Sonic perception is variable; we fill in and compensate, we adjust. The matter of the sound becomes entangled in the psychic experience of listening. The speaker is the concrete source of this experience, the originator, but tracing that transition is impossible. Barely-perceptible engineering, mystical audiophile analysis, trade secrets, patented techniques.

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Speakers live in the living-room, with the TV, bookcases, couches, and so on. They sit on stands, on the floor, on shelves; they are installed, placed and forgotten, or moved around, pivoted to shift the stereo image, pulled away from the wall so as not to choke the bass. There will be a "sweet spot" — that point where the sonic image is most vivid, where the sound emanates not from the speaker mouth-holes but from the air between them. After installing your speakers, you might find that spot, sit, and listen appreciatively. The speakers should be at ear-level; a tight mouth-ear alignment, a whisper, an audience of one. With the boom in "home theatre", speakers are multiplying out of control. In ads, little tiny ones grow on stalks at the back of the room. Flat wide ones are under the television screen. They all point inwards: the whole room is a sweet spot, a bath of movie-sound. Décor is all-important; modern speakers tend to vanish into corners, subwoofers hide in cupboards. Amplified sound hovers unanchored, a kind of virtual image. These vanishing speakers still have faces, but their primary display is of smallness. Hear how big I sound, look how tiny I am, crouched here in the corner.

Setting up a stereo, placing the speakers, stripping the cable ends, stacking up the components, stringing the wires behind the furniture. *Stacker* has its back to the entrance; speaker wires radiate out in clumps. The dusty nest of flex at the back of the hi-fi, splayed out proudly.

When I move house, the first thing I want to unpack is the stereo. The radiating sound seems to claim the space, make it comfortable, less unfamiliar. A territorial projection, and a performance of domestic comfort: with the stereo on, everything is okay. Sit down, relax.

What comes out of the stereo, after all, is the cultural voiceprint of the listener. It speaks yourself back to you; that mix of sound is a complex manifestation of cultural consumption, participation, identification, all shifting through time. This is from when I was really into late 60s jazz; now I like Japanese noise, but I'm also into two-step. I listen to this or that radio station. We absorb recorded culture through multifarious channels (movies, shops,

clubs, parties, the radio, the net) and bring it home, project it into the lounge room, appropriate it, mix it in with the personalised trappings of home, the carpet and the coffee table. The hi-fi re-speaks the recorded artefact, filtered through its electroacoustic peculiarities (the woolly bass, that crackling connection). Once again, it's a nexus: private culture / public culture.

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Of course the home hi-fi has cultures of its own. The esoteric boffinism of the audiophile, the sensuous cocooning of the home theatre buff, the designer homemaker with brushed metal boxes on display. Commercial hi-fi culture will sell you anything you want: grunt, elegance, knobs, flashing lights, native timbers, cast aluminium, silver-woven cables, any number of watts and bits and channels. A neat stack of matching components, a nice slender pair of speakers.

Stacker works with the flipside of commercial hi-fi: free hi-fi. Big old black three-way speakers sitting on the footpath. An old solid-state amp with the volume knob missing in a back laneway. Giant, cloth-fronted cabinets lurking in junk shops. Systems assemble themselves by accumulation, bricolage; home audio technology is polymorphous, and best of all, slow-moving. The mechanisms haven't changed in half a century: source, amplifier, speaker. Hook up that amp you found, see how it sounds. The hi-fi junk collector permutes systems, looking for a better mix, an elusive synthesis, a mutual cancelling-out of flaws and failed or bogus innovations. Fashion strata meld and clash: 80s gold boxes with 60s brushed metal, oversized 70s speakers with knobs and dials. The signal travels through pop-cultural eras and comes out unscathed, in the present.

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Just so in the stack, which is a wall of speaker morphology and design history, but scattered and mingled, then flattened into a giant composite speakerface. It's a boyish hi-fi-nerd fantasy: if I could just hook up *all these speakers at once*... The hi-fi grows into a PA stack, an edifice, a wall of sound which stays perversely mute. It presses in, facing us up against the wall opposite.

Time is flattened out too; in the stack it's scrambled with the speakerfaces. Across the gap, woodgrain technology faces beige plastic; past faces present. We hang suspended between the two, in a zone of stasis. On the monitor Kerr "dances" every quarter-hour, on the hour. Time passes; nothing changes. To say that history stops would be too strong; it's more that it evaporates, it doesn't occur to us. Analog retro mingles continuously with digital futurism, the two become indistinguishable, fashion spins in ever-tighter cycles. Kerr dances in front of the hi-fi to a clockwork Casio beat. The stack is a Mondrian, a modernist picture-plane built from cloth and brown veneer, a seventeenth-

hand reference, a minimalist classic; it could be in a style mag. Modernist design resurfaces as expensive interior décor.

Perhaps it's also a wall of nostalgia. We were born around 1970, grew up through advancing waves of consumer electronics. The rush of technical innovation is taken for granted, but we're ambivalent — it's meaningless, senseless. That early 70s origin point can't be a break, a moment of authenticity, anything like that, but it exerts a certain pull. It's over the horizon of memory, in that subjective black hole of infancy. Like Mondrian, like High Modernism, we only know its reverberations, rehashings, retro-cycles. Once again a sense of weightlessness, suspension, inconsequentiality. The shot sounds like drama, an event, a crisis, but it's not. It's a videogame shot, from an endless logical reservoir, it's a circle of black pixels and a sample, it travels painlessly from stack to monitor, through the air. It will shoot again and again, nothing will be killed (or even damaged). "Bang." Time passes.

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The "dance" is a deadpan joke, a minimal digital sketch of bodily motion. Kerr's head and bare shoulders bob up and down, or less: an image moves from point to point, down-up-down-up, in time with the beat. A kind of binary dancing, possible only on screen, leaping instantaneously from here to there. The image is a photo-cutout, digital remake of an inanimate stand-in. The joke is that we understand this as a dance, a performance; we (literally) flesh it out from the slightest surface, the beat and the motion, the cutout image. With the timer, it works itself into a template of anticipation and presence; a cuckoo clock, the guards at the palace. Performance means presence and liveness, acting, being in the present, being witnessed, right? Kerr spins out an effortless, automatic performance, a sequence of tiny present moments, every fifteen minutes regardless. We witness him dancing, ever the same and ever different, newly present each time.

The accompanying beat is another kind of blank two-step: boom chik boom chik. Once again, the least possible information, but it unpacks out into bodies moving, genres, cultures, and collapses back into nothing, a self-obliterating present, a stupid jig. Drum machine sounds, standardised and fetishised inscriptions, computer-mimicking-electronics-mimicking-drums, drained of anything but a network of recycling and reappropriation. In one context these dumb, Casio sounds express a careful fake-naivete: in dance music culture they are a nostalgic reference to electro and breakbeat music, the now-mythical origins of the contemporary constellations of "beats." Arranged like so, boom-chik, a whole other genre is invoked: this is house music, the drop of the kick and the lift of the high hat, a two beat structure at 130 beats per minute, another sequence of micro-presents: now and now and now and now. Like the cutout image dancing, we happily interpolate the point in between, the beats in between; hum along your favourite bassline. The near-complete emptiness

of the two-point loop opens up into body memory and a continuum of public/private sound/kinaesthesia. And then it's itself again, boom chik.

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These are barest-possible gestures towards performance and music — refusals to play those particular games. The interactive element of *Stacker* is a more pointed refusal; interactivity, after all, has been one of the great white hopes of electronic art and the broader 90s push for "multimedia." In its traditional figuration it works hard for a connection, an interface, an involvement between work and audience, it aspires to flexibility, openness, engagement. Recently interactivity has begun to be treated with more suspicion, deployed less idealistically. Here, Kerr subjects it to a kind of deadly accurate assassination. This is anti-interactive, sneaky, violent, oblique, accidental; walk into the room and a shot goes off, on the other side of the stack. No interface, no announcement, no help screen, no invitation, this "interactivity" trips you up, slices imperceptibly across your shin. No obvious connection between door and shot. In *head_SHOT* (1999) Kerr sets up an interactive booby-trap; walking into the space "loads" a monitor-gun, walking in front of the gun sets it off, and as in *Stacker* a matching digital bullethole catches the shot on an opposing screen. Here the more likely outcome is accidental murder, not suicide; trip the beam and you'll shoot anyone behind the wall. A simple act of fake violence which, because it's unintended, has more of an edge than the consensual, elaborate, routine slaughter of a contemporary computer game.

It's not a self-consciously critical gesture, a careful interrogation; more like another refusal to play, which is far more interesting. For what's being refused here is more than "interactivity" — it's almost a whole genre of art-making, an approach, an attitude. High-tech art ("new media", "digital media", whatever) tends to feel earnest, geekish, somehow laboured. It's often working the "tech", pushing the devices, squeezing out an aesthetic or conceptual payoff. At the same that practice is profoundly ambivalent about the technology, unsure whether to cover over its failings, push through them, or expose them with a wry grin of defeat. By contrast *Stacker*, like the rest of Kerr's work, is marked by a complete absence of tech-anxiety, a lightness, and a willingness to do *almost nothing* with the technology. Here the computer seems less like an expensive, intensive "brain", more like a dumb appliance, a toaster. Perhaps another generational marker: Kerr used to work in an old-school video arcade. Space Invaders, sit-down Galaga and Xevious, Pac-Man, heavy chipboard cabinets, glass tops. Dumb boxes with a raw, reflex interface. Games which are all surface — happily flattened into the screen pixelgrid (*Stacker* is a kind of exploded videogame / hi-fi hybrid).

Among other things, Kerr's work signals a point where digital media technologies begin to disappear into the work, rather than dominating it. At last, since in general they're mundane, unremarkable. The computer screen is

just another object-surface in *Stacker's* network of retro-Modernist puns and speaker-face-objects; in fact the monitor gets actively absorbed into the work's temporal circuits of fashion and consumer electronics: one more designed object in the consumer-electronic fashion cycle. A lump of stuff, not a representational frame or a window into another world. Currently Sony and Microsoft are locked in a home-entertainment arms-race, with games machines becoming veritable reality engines, sublime portals of digital immersion. Kerr's work offers a counterpoint, an exploded games machine in the olden style, a great pile of analog electronics, a flat timber veneer screen, a shot, a bullethole, a beat. A kind of art game, obstinately simple and slight. A conjunction of actions, sounds, objects and surfaces, which opens up into whole cultural networks, practices, and then collapses back into itself. Bang. Boom chik.

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