Viewing the Wrong Side of the Screen in Experimental Electronica Performances
Sonya Hofer

ABSTRACT
While there is considerable attention in music and media studies on works that jump to the screen, from MTV to Blue-rayballads, to videogames, in this paper I will look instead at works that jump behind the screen, the laptop screen. In most experimental electronica performances, the laptop computer is the main “live” instrument. In this mode of performativity, not only are our performers situated behind a screen, a figurative “cage”—or literally the back of the screen—what is viewed in the live setting, offering a curious perspective on mediated musical contexts.

The most pervasive critique of experimental electronica performances stems from a perceived lack of visual spectacle and gesture by the performer, whose main “live” instrument is the laptop computer. Performances are sometimes read as lifeless, disengaged, empty, or meaningless. In this mode of performativity, not only is the artist situated behind a screen, so too is the audience. In a live setting, audiences view the backside of the screen, offering a curious perspective on mediated musical contexts.

The laptop is central to the conception and experience of experimental electronica, with direct and clearly articulated qualitative consequences. For this reason, and the very fact that I write this paper on a laptop, my project is to delve deeper into our meaningful relationships with laptops by thinking more holistically and phenomenologically about screens. I consider “screenness” within the context of musical performance, here examining notable live sets by acclaimed experimental musicians Tim Hecker and Tim Mars. Typical of experimental electronica, Hecker’s performances take place in a range of contexts and, in what follows, I look at two very different sets. Closely evaluating each and taking cues from their critical reception, I employ screenness as a mode that frames our experiencing of the music, impacts our assumptions and expectations about laptop performativity, and also reveals how the music experience of experimental electronica, with direct and phenomenological about screens. I consider

1 I emphasize here the actuality of public performances and as they are mediated through YouTube. People can experience experimental electronica in other contexts, for examples, at home, in their cars, by themselves with an iPod, listening to hip hop or industrial music, which would lead into interesting continued projects, i.e., considering screenness in these contexts.

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The already-numerous critiques of laptop performativity, while not my direct focus, offer me a chance to reiterate the question and to answer that indeed we don’t know if the DJ is playing Pac-Man. What interests me is how Montano’s question encapsulates the differing ways we value “liveness” and what we demand from live performance. The very fact that it matters whether or not the laptop DJ is playing Pac-Man indicates how audiences require visual confirmation of the artistic process. Audiences want to know that something, and furthermore someone, is creating sound in real-time. Of particular interest is how these critiques put the screen at the center. The screen consumes performers to an apparent detriment. The screen, not even its front, but its back, is an audiencessfocal point. Screens make the source and nature of sound production (or Pac-Man playing) opaque, and direct our gaze onto something visually mundane.

Music historians have responded, consciously and subconsciously, in varying ways to “remedy” the issues accompanying laptop performance, from simply moving away from the computer to adding visual components like an accompanying film or immersive lighting, to incorporating additional live musicians or more traditionally viewed instruments, to projecting screens onto the audience, among others. Even when these responses were not necessarily an explicit attempt to amend critiques of laptop performativity, they might nonetheless be viewed as remedies helping audiences to “engage” with the music, for example by offering a greater sense of visual spectacle and sound production; providing something to look at; and, in general, making a “musical process” clear. This paper, however, does not suggest types of laptop-based performances that are “better” live, or seek to prove whether or not DJs are really playing Pac-Man. It does not ratify or reject the Black Box called “problems” of laptop performativity, or prescribe how audiences “should” recalibrate and adapt to these performances. Instead, taking a different critical tack than others’ qualitative critiques of laptop performativity, I focus on how the laptop screen signals and plays a significant role in constructing contextual meaning. With the aim to enrich these critical discourses that address such issues of performativity and reception, I examine them within “screenness” as an expressive and experimental paradigm in analyzing the performances.

The laptop is not merely an inert object. As part of a generation of screen natives, for whom the growing presence of the laptop and mobile devices are key, I consider how we are conditioned to them, suggesting a kind of fundamentality to them, a screenic technogenesis.7 I build from theories of screen subjectivity, notably Kate Mondloch who writes about screeness in experimental art contexts, saying:

... Mars who has added a drummer on drum kit as part of their live set. Squarepusher who at times performs on his electric bass, and also Slub who have incorporated screen projections of their live coding as part of their performances.


6 Of particular interest is how these critiques put the screen at the center. The screen consumes performers to an apparent detriment. The screen, not even its front, but its back, is an audiencessfocal point. Screens make the source and nature of sound production (or Pac-Man playing) opaque, and direct our gaze onto something visually mundane.

7 This bifurcation between technician and musician as a kind of critique in electronic music has many historical roots. See, for example, Georgina Born’s observation of this dichotomy in her book on IRCAM. See Georgina Born, Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde.

8 With the aim to enrich these critical discourses that address such issues of performativity and reception, I examine them within “screenness” as an expressive and experimental paradigm in analyzing the performances.
Experimental Electronica Performances
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ABSTRACT
While there is considerable attention in music and media studies on works that jump to the screen, from MTV to Blue-ray ballad movies, to videogames, in this paper I will look instead at works that jump behind the screen, the laptop screen. In most experimental electronica performances, the laptop computer is the main “live” instrument. In this mode of performativity, not only are our performers situated behind a screen, a figurative “cabinet” – or literally the backside of the screen – what is viewed in the live setting, offering a curious perspective on mediated musical contexts.

The most pervasive critique of experimental electronica performances stems from a perceived lack of visual spectacle and gesture by the performer, whose main “live” instrument is the laptop computer. Performances are sometimes read as lifeless, disengaged, cold, and inauthentic. In this mode of performativity, not only is the artist situated behind a screen, so too is the audience. In a live setting, audiences view the backside of the screen, offering a curious perspective on mediated musical contexts.

The laptop is central to the conception and experience of experimental electronica, with direct and clearly articulated qualitative consequences.1 For this reason, and the very fact that I write this paper on a laptop, my project is to delve deeper into our meaningful relationships with laptops by thinking more holistically and phenomenologically about screens. I consider “screeness” within the context of musical performance, here examining notable live sets by acclaimed experimental electronica artists Tim Hecker. Typical of experimental electronica, Hecker’s performances take place in a range of contexts and, in what follows, I look at two very different sets. Closely evaluating each and taking cues from their critical reception, I employ screeness as a mode that frames our experiencing of the music, impacts our assumptions and expectations about laptop performativity, and also reveals how the music effectively works in dialogue with and within its varied, live-musico-experiential contexts.

1 I have written on this topic in greater depth, considering the work of Richard Charter, see: “Atonic Music: Navigating Experimental Electronica and Sound Art Through Microsound,” Organised Sound 19/03 (Dec 2014): 295-303, as a kind of companion piece to this paper.

2 Goodwin cited in: Philip Auslander, Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture. London and New York: Routledge, 1999, 11. In addition to Goodwin’s citation, see, for example, Fennesz who has collaborated closely with deep-rooted ideals regarding what constitutes musical skill. The use of software such as Max/ MSP and Ableton, which allow for increased automation and simulation, contributes to a misconception that laptops make musical creation and performance “easier,” or even that the music has been faked. And while Goodwin acknowledges the legitimacy of programming skills, his evocative choice of words insinuate the pervasive regard of computer-wielding laptop artists as technicians, i.e., not even musicians (see also Goodwin). Hecker’s performances take behind the screen — becomes what is viewed in the main “live” instrument is the laptop computer. Visual spectacle and gesture by the performer, whose electronica performances stems from a perceived lack of experimental electronica, Hecker’s performances take performativity, while not my direct focus, offer me a springboard for considering a different critical lens on laptop-based experimental electronica performances. These critiques, including Ed Montano’s aptly titled article “’How Do You Know He’s Not Playing Pac-Man While He’s Supposed to Be DJing?’: Technology, Formats and the Digital Future of DJ Culture” give me license to reiterate the question and to answer that indeed we don’t know if the DJ is playing Pac-Man. What interests me is how Montano’s question encapsulates the differing ways we value “liveness” and what we demand from live performance. The very fact that it matters whether or not the laptop DJ is playing Pac-Man indicates how audiences require visual confirmation of the artistic process. Audiences want to know that something, and furthermore someone, is creating sound in real-time. Of particular interest is how these critical perspectives put the screen at the center. The screen consumes performers to an apparent detriment. The screen, not even its front, but its back, is an audiencess focal point. Screens make the source and medium of sound production (or Pac-Man playing) opaque, and direct our gaze onto something visually mundane.

The screen, in this sense, has responded, consciously and subconsciously, in varying ways to “remedy” the issues accompanying laptop performance, from simply moving away from the laptop to adding a visual component like an accompanying film or immersive lighting, to incorporating additional live musicians or more traditionally viewed instruments, to projecting screens onto the audience, among others.2 Even when laptop-based experimental electronica performances. 3 Goodwin cited in: Philip Auslander, Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture. London and New York: Routledge, 1999, 11. In addition to Goodwin’s citation, see, for example, Fennesz who has collaborated closely with music artists who are at once a DJ, electronic musician, and sound artist. He emphasizes how much more dynamic, diverse, and challenging this field of creative activity has become by pointing out the possible limitations and entailments of such labels. As his work straddles these not-so-discrete fields, it raises issues of liveness and mediation, notably the distinction between how music is presented live and how it is present live.3 Additionally, his tools play a highly affective role in how people conceive of “live” music. Many experimental electronica musicians, like Hecker, use the laptop as their main instrument in both creation and performance. Ideas about authenticity are embroiled in ideas about technology, and in are in continuall flux, as popular music and media scholar Andrew Goodwin has observed:

Playing analogue synthesizers is now a mark of authenticity, where it was once a sign of alienation— to pop iconography, the image of musicians standing immobile behind synths signified coldness… Now it is the image of a technician hunched over a computer terminal that is problematic — but that, like the image of the synth player, can and will change… The use of the laptop as a “problematic,” as Goodwin notes, has to do with its visualization of musical skills. In the context of musical performance, see “The (Anti-) Laptop Aesthetic,” Contemporary Music Review 22, no. 4 (2003): 67-79; Timothy Jaeger, who offers a pointed critique of laptop performativity, whom characteristics as he introduces new paradigms for performance, see “The (Anti-) Laptop Aesthetic,” Contemporary Music Review 22, no. 4 (2003): 53-57; and Tad Turner, who cites a lack of comportment code due to a diversity in venue and seeks a mediation of, and due to a diversity in venue, and seeks a mediation of, and adjustment to, the various strengths and weaknesses of venue types in “The Resonance of the Cubicle: Laptop Performance in Post-Digital Music,” Contemporary Music Review 22, no. 4 (2003): 81-92.

3 This bifurcation between technician and musician as a kind of critique in electronic music has many historical roots. See, for example, Georgina Born’s observation of this bifurcation in her ethnography of IRCAM. See Georgina Born, Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. 4 Ed Montano, “’How Do You Know He’s Not Playing Pac-Man While He’s Supposed to Be DJing?’: Technology, Formats and the Digital Future of DJ Culture.” Popular Music 29, no. 3 (2010): 397-416. 5 Montano and Auslander have both addressed this topic, i.e., how a sense of authenticity created is rock music (Auslander) and electronic music (Montano) by making a music producer, who will lead into interesting continued projects, i.e., considering screeness in these contexts.
screening, but also encompasses sentient bodies and psychic desires, institutional codes, and discursive constructs.10

As such, I want to look at Hecker’s performances as part of a screened worldview, thinking about how the computer screen specifically activates a particular kind of intimate phenomenological relation. Its materiality and presence are key, not simply what it screens, inclusive of sounds, but in the very mode of screening itself, conjured in places and presupposed as a frame of reference. Lucas Introna and Fernando Ilharco, who offer a phenomenology of screens, foreground this approach, writing:

…we do not want to focus on the experience of watching screens, nor do we want to focus on the content of screens. We want to suggest that there is something prior to all of these, namely what conditions us to turn to it ‘as a screen’ in the first instance.11

In considering screenness, the following looks at two recent performances by Hecker, uploaded to YouTube by audience members, thus positioning ourselves also as part of an audience. Immediately upon viewing these performances, one is alerted to three distinct intertwined phenomenological relationships and perspectives, which I will touch on throughout this paper: which conditions us to turn to it ‘as a screen’ in the first instance, which we watch on YouTube. However, what are the concerns regarding the lack of engagement of audiences to while absorbing the music. There may be many things to watch, or maybe we choose to close our eyes and watch something else in our minds, but we are not thinking about the screen itself, conjured in places and presupposed as a frame of reference. Lucas Introna and Fernando Ilharco, who offer a phenomenology of screens, foreground this approach, writing:

As Introna and Ilharco note, screens call us to attention, as what is framed is in the screen is already contextualized as important. Media theorist Lev Manovich sharpens this point, emphasizing how the frame is also antagonistic: in displaying what is included, it is what is excluded, i.e., to screen is also to choose. Yet correspondingly it is not in our mind, but rather, drawing from the etymology of “screen,” the laptop is a barrier that obscures Hecker to the viewers, and simultaneously obscures the audience from Hecker.12

As following YouTube commenter laments of the video:

I have trouble with stuff like this…I LOVE his record, but couldn’t imagine it being an enjoyable experience to see him mess around behind a laptop...

This kind of exclusion is alienating, like watching a date text from their mobile phone at the dinner table—a comparison that perhaps gives more depth to critics’ concerns regarding the lack of engagement of audiences and performers in laptop performativity. Yet, the backside of the screen, something that we encounter perhaps as frequently as the front-face, is drastically under-theorized.

I would argue that these backsides are, crucially, part of the potentiality of the screen, otherwise we wouldn’t call the Apple logos over the laptop is not decorate mobile phone cases, or place tape over the laptop in the way we assume performers will be, or as ‘screening’Hillary Lucas, “Faces, Interfaces, Screens: Relational Ontologies of Framing, Attention and Distraction,” Translations 18 (2010). Should Hecker be wholly engaged in the backside?

As Mondloch and Anne Friedberg have theorized, construct inconsequential, it does not disappear, rather it remains as a significant visual cue of the screen. Screens, as Mondloch and Anne Friedberg have theorized, construct “an architecture of spectatorship.” Laptop performances are fascinating precisely because they undermine the ‘coersive nature of screeningviewing’; we are not drawn into the laptop screens’ flashing images, content, and fantasy, but still crucially frame and direct our viewing. A screen signals that we should be watching, 13

The first video depicts Hecker’s performance at the 2012 Pitchfork Music Festival in Chicago. We see here his performance of the track “Virgin I,” which was at the time of this writing still unpleased, but later appeared on his seventh full-length album, the 2013, Virgin. This track segues into “The Piano Drop,” from his 2011 album, Ravebeast, 1972. In some ways this might be an expected scene. In the context of a festival set, Hecker is focalized, framed through a stage setup, which is further amplified by the meta-screen through which we watch on YouTube. However, what are the peculiarities of this mode of performativity as evidenced here?

Example 1: YouTube video of Tim Hecker at 2012 Pitchfork Music Festival: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkkp7dn2j8

Hecker, prompted by conditions surrounding his performance, and the video of it, can be mystifying for how a performer interacts with a screen. However, while complicated by certain mobile device practices, this is not as singularly locked into his screen, this does not counteract that complaint of laptop performativity, rather his performance seems more so a performance. Here his engagement with his screen suggests something more quotidian rather than performative—perhaps akin to the way I can take a break from typing this paper to put away my coffee cup all while still “working.” In a similar sense, this performance, and the video of it, can be mystifying for both the live audience and YouTube viewers. Is he playing music or is this part of the soundcheck? Again, what should I be watching here? Should I be seeing this? How should I be seeing this? What should I be seeing while listening to this? Would I know this was part of the “actual” set if I happened upon this scene?

These issues and questions regarding Hecker’s set as a performance are common in YouTube video itself. With Hecker further framed through the screen and already contextualized as a focal entity, as suggested by Introna and Ilharco, the sense of what we are and should be watching is doubly unclear.14 The YouTube viewer, according to Mondloch and Friedberg, “is something prior to all of these, namely that we do not want to focus on the experience of ⎯— ——that we do not want to focus on the experience of ⎯— ——that we do not want to focus on the experience of ⎯— ——..15


While complicated by certain mobile device practices, “face-to-face” is rendered unclear. How a performer interacts with a screen, and this is a common complaint about their performance. Hecker goes against our expectation of how a performer interacts with a screen; however, however he is not as singularly locked into his screen, this does not counteract that complaint of laptop performativity, rather his performance seems more so a performance. Here his engagement with his screen suggests something more quotidian rather than performative—perhaps akin to the way I can take a break from typing this paper to put away my coffee cup all while still “working.” In a similar sense, this performance, and the video of it, can be mystifying for both the live audience and YouTube viewers. Is he playing music or is this part of the soundcheck? Again, what should I be watching here? Should I be seeing this? How should I be seeing this? What should I be seeing while listening to this? Would I know this was part of the “actual” set if I happened upon this scene?

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As Introna and Ilharco note, screens call us to attention, as what is framed in the screen is already contextualized as important. Media theorist Lev Manovich sharpens this point, emphasizing how what we see on a screen is also antagonistic: in displaying what is included, it also excludes what is excluded, i.e., to screen is also to choose. Yet, correspondence is not in our mind, but what we expect to see in the frame is something we are prepared to see, whereas the frame itself is a barrier that obscures the viewer from the projector and, simultaneously, obscures the audience from Hecker.14 As following YouTube commenter lamented the video:

I have trouble with stuff like this... I LOVE his record, but can’t imagine it being an enjoyable experience to see him mess around behind a laptop..."

This kind of exclusion is alienating, like watching a date movie through the telephone while a H gibi friends is huddled over the Apple logo on the back of our laptops as Hecker does here. Even if its backside is supposed to be inconsequential, rather it remains as a significant visual cue of the screen. Screens, as Mondloch and Anne Friedberg have theorized, construct “an architecture of spectatorship.” Laptop performances are fascinating precisely because they undermine the evocative nature of screenviewing: we are not drawn into the laptop screens’ flashing images, content, and fantasy, but rather, as Introna and Ilharco note, are user-oriented. A screen signals that we should be watching, but faced with the screen’s backside, and compounded further by the frame of the YouTube video, audiences pose the question: What should we be watching?

In staged musical performances, we are not typically surprised by what we should pay attention to while absorbing the music. There may be many things to watch, or maybe we choose to close our eyes and watch swimming in our minds, but we aren’t generally pushed to question: what should I be watching? But the screen, and particularly its backside, leads audiences to consciously or unconsciously pose this as a rhetorical question, “What do I see?” for what to attend to. A focal point is pre-supposed by the screen, but the focal point is confounded. Intensifying this, musical sounds are dissipated from the screen, which further perplexes our relation to the screen and scene as a focal point. And finally, an untouched sense of the performance, prompted by conditions surrounding screenness, is unintentionally bolstered by our presumed subject, Hecker himself, as I will discuss shortly.

In further examining this performance, one assumption of laptop performativity is an engagement between the performer and the laptop. Thinking about this condition fits neatly into ideas about screen subjectivity more broadly, and also, subsequent complaints concerning laptop performances. The presumed orientation of a viewer to a screen as they are habitually drawn in, from mobile devices to films, is generally “face-to-face,” which elicits Goodwin’s characterization of the hunched computer performer who is engrossed with the screen rather than engaged with the audience. We come to expect someone using a laptop, and thus a laptop performer, to be occupied with the screen in this manner. Yet, is Hecker absorbed by the laptop in the way we assume performers will be, or as screenaned, as described by Mondloch? Re-watching the Pitchfork set, in this video, Hecker takes a more flexible stance and is at times only peripherally engaged with his laptop. While this is partially explained by the fact that he has other instruments to attend to, there is still a kind of peculiarity to this scene. Can we imagine a pianist getting up and wandering away from their instrument mid-performance? Or a vocalist talking to techs mid-song? Although certainly in rock/pop sets there may be some dialogue between the musicians and stage technicians, this is usually quite discrete.15 Should Hecker be wholly engrossed in his terminal? Again, a laptop performer is commonly assumed to be consumed by their own screen, and this is a common complaint about their performance. Hecker goes against our expectation of how a musician interacts with their instrument, however, as he is not as singularly locked into his screen, this does not counteract that complaint of laptop performativity, rather his performance seems even further destabilized, for Hecker seems even further destabilized as a performance. Here his engagement with his screen suggests something more quotidian rather than performative—perhaps akin to the way I can take a break from typing this paper to put away my coffee cup all while still “working.” In a similar sense, this performance, and the video of it, can be mystifying for both the live audience and YouTube viewers. Is he playing music or is this part of the soundcheck? Again, what should I be watching here? Should I be seeing this? How should I be seeing this? What should I be seeing while listening to this? Would I know this was part of the “actual” set if I happened upon this scene?

These issues and questions regarding Hecker’s set as a performance are also contained in the YouTube video itself. With Hecker further framed through the screen and already contextualized as a focal entity, as suggested by Introna and Ilharco, the sense of what we see and should be watching is doubly unclear.17 The YouTube viewer comments communicate the precariousness of this performance and allude to well-worn complaints about laptop performativity:

I feel he needs a more interesting set, with jaw dropping lighting and visuals, something to help intensify the experience.18

Yeah. I agree. This seems awkward. This isn't daytime music.

This seems like the absolute worst place for an artist like Tim Hecker to play. I feel bad for him really. He should be playing a dim lit theater, a cave, a church, an alleyway... anything but a day time outdoor festival set.”

Examining screenness with regard to Hecker’s Pitchfork set has led us to question what we are viewing as a performance by amplifying a disjunction between what one experiences auditorily and what one experiences visually. Similarly, the YouTube comments draw attention to this disjuncture, but their critiques do not simply react to a problem of the visuals—a lack of visuals, the wrong visuals, or unintentional visuals. Rather, I suggest these critiques reveal how certain

14 I would note that there are, at times, pressing matters in which the stage technicians would need to take immediate and direct action on the stage. From what we know contextually about Hecker’s set, there was a rainstorm approaching, and perhaps they were preparing the equipment. However, this does not detract from how we (in the audience at Pitchfork and through the YouTube video) might understand how Hecker is able to interact with his screen.
15 Introna and Ilharco, 66-67.
16 From “Canadian compensate Wombat” 2014.
17 From “Christopher Robin,” 2013.
conditions of screenness in this festival context direct observers to parse unnaturally between the sonic and the visual, rather than appreciate the set as more holistically experiential. Moreover, and significantly here, the criticality also develops performativity and screenness may have different affective ramifications in this context, moving beyond the visual vs. sonic, toward a more holistic sense of experientiality. This video documents a 2012 performance that took place in the Chiesa di Santa Cristina in Parma, Italy, a beautiful baroque church that is home to one of Hecker’s performances that does take place in an actual church.

While I have ruminated on Hecker’s performance as a parting of the sonic and visual as also implicit in the viewer commentary, my aim here is not to separate the senses. As we will see in the following performance excerpts, screenness may have different affective ramifications in this context, moving beyond the visual vs. sonic, toward a more holistic sense of experientiality.

In this context, the screen makes people conscious of the place of the event in a way that is very different from the Pitchfork Festival. Much like a television set situated on the wooden floor of a white-walled gallery projecting a work of video art, Hecker’s laptop screen amplifies a sense of place. While the screen may prompt the work, the screen, performance, Hecker, and the work are a part of a greater totality in which the audience is also entangled. The screen’s materiality matters: its form, its design, its look, its front, its back, et cetera. Our imagination of a screen matters, our mental screen works reciprocally with places informing our experience. Similarly, Michel Chion, prolific theorist on the sensoriality of film, observes that experiential ambiances, and works in consolidation with the laptop, exploit the sensoriality of film, observes that experiential ambiances, and works in consolidation with the laptop, are suggested here. See: Kaplan.

Hecker’s performances seem to break out of a simply audiovisual context dialogue with platial surroundings. In watching this video, I would then ask, what might it say about the position of the performer in the live setting? Perhaps the response is bunt: since there is “not much” to watch, arguably there is no need to focus the camera on Hecker. One might then wonder why a video would be taken if the scene is static i.e., why not just record the performance as sound? Or why not include some better-quality image (for example, there are many audio uploads on YouTube of sound recordings with some better-quality image (for example, there are many audio uploads on YouTube of sound recordings with good quality sound, but it is by no means devoid of rich and affective imagery—imagery that evokes and emphasizes the importance of the specific place and time of the performance. In this way the video communicates a centrality of experience and sense of place conveyed quite differently in this context.

As Mondloch illuminates in her analyses of screen-reliant art installations, a screen calls attention to the “real” space of the projective situation, that is, its actual surroundings, rather than being simply illusory (i.e., what is projected). Within the church, one is not uncomfortable and engaged in such an environment for imminent rain amongst a cluster of simultaneous musical performances, seeing a haphazard stage attended to by technicians, and ultimately presented with the “wrong” sound, due to the main instrument being off, and rattle to attention the musician. In the church performance, rather than prompting viewers to scan for what to watch or to question what one sees, the screen potentially incites a different impulse and response. The YouTube comments accompanying the Chiesa di Santa Cristina video serve as evidence: there are no complaints regarding the concert, the performance, or the experience.

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My inquiry into screenness and musical performance is in many ways in line with one of audiovisual studies’ most significant contributions: discussions concerned with how media contexts dialogues with platial surroundings. See: Chion, “Film, Music, and Ambiances,” in Screen, 2012.

In experimental electronica performances, such as Hecker’s, this potential of the laptop as a totality works in dialogue with the music. Synchronously, his musical works are in dialogue with place. Hecker’s music both corroborates and creates conditions wherein a screen can be experienced through the act of listening. Hecker’s music dimensionalizes sound, constructing and idealizing ambiances, and works in consolidation with the laptop, are suggested here. See: Kaplan.

Hecker’s works feature places that might be experienced through the act of listening. Hecker’s music dimensionalizes sound, constructing and idealizing ambiances, and works in consolidation with the laptop, are suggested here. See: Kaplan.

25 Mondloch writes extensively on this topic in her book, citing the writings of art critics Cornwell, Krauss, and Michelson and artworks by Michael Snow and VALIE EXPORT. Mondloch, 61.
26 My inquiry into screenness and musical performance is in many ways in line with one of audiovisual studies’ most significant contributions: discussions concerned with how media contexts dialogues with platial surroundings. See: Chion, “Film, Music, and Ambiances,” in Screen, 2012.
27 His works feature places that might be experienced through the act of listening. Hecker’s music dimensionalizes sound, constructing and idealizing ambiances, and works in consolidation with the laptop, are suggested here. See: Kaplan.
28 My inquiry into screenness and musical performance is in many ways in line with one of audiovisual studies’ most significant contributions: discussions concerned with how media contexts dialogues with platial surroundings. See: Chion, “Film, Music, and Ambiances,” in Screen, 2012.
31 Making this point previously, the Pitchfork video redoubled the effect of the stage, seeming to reinforce and reiterate how Hecker and his laptop were assumed to be a frame of reference. While we do not view Hecker and the laptop in the Chiesa di Santa Cristina video, the video’s screenness and corresponding construction of place seems even more pronounced. The screenic perspective in the Chiesa set implies the presence of the performer by so consciously directing away from him, simultaneously highlighting how viewers participate in the piece and meaning-making. The audience-member videographer directs away from Hecker and the laptop, imparting meaning into the video. Perhaps, as I infer as a fellow/alligator, black is chosen to echo and to invoke the phenomenological sense of place for us; perhaps the videographer’s perspective implies how viewers understand their own laptop performativity, i.e., not assumedly as central, necessary, or interesting to the frame, and thus directs elsewhere.
32 Mondloch, 61.
33 My inquiry into screenness and musical performance is in many ways in line with one of audiovisual studies’ most significant contributions: discussions concerned with how media contexts dialogues with platial surroundings. See: Chion, “Film, Music, and Ambiances,” in Screen, 2012.
35 Citing Anne Friedberg, Mondloch underscores the critical power of media viewing, Mondloch, 56-58.
conditions of screeness in this festival context direct observers to parse unnaturally between the sonic and the visual, rather than appreciate the set as more holistically “experiential.” Moreover, and significantly here, the video documents a 2012 performance that took place in the Chiesa di Santa Cristina in Parma, Italy, a beautiful baroque church that is unassuming from the outside, yet resplendent inside. Hecker here performs tracks mainly from his 2011 Ravedeath, 1972 album, itself primarily recorded in the Santa Cristina Church in Reykjavík, Iceland, where he used its pipe organ as central source material.

Example 2: YouTube video of Tim Hecker in the Santa Cristina Church, 2012: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcW4s4SLQ

Viewing this video of Hecker’s concert, I ask, what is striking about it? Immediately, what strikes me is that someone would record and then upload a 49 minute visually static video of a live performance—a live video, by which Hecker, the headline act, is completely omitted.

In watching this video, I would then ask, what might explain the position of the performer in the live setting? Perhaps the response is blun: since there is “not much” to watch, arguably there is no need to focus the camera on Hecker. One might then wonder why a video would be uploaded if the scene is static i.e., why not just record the performance as sound? Or why not include visually static video of a live performance—a video record of the performance as son by itself, as Mondloch’s writings on the materiality of screens are key here, as she emphasizes how “interface matters” when considering screen-related artistic techniques and extrapolations of meaning. Her writings along with Introna and Ilharco, discussed throughout, are central in considering screens and “screeness” in this manner. 24 His works feature places and contexts that might be experienced through the act of listening. Hecker’s music dimensionizes sound, constructing and idealizing ambiances, and works in consolidation with the laptop, which is in part a vessel for this sound, but crucially also an important signifier for how we experience the music in place.25

Evoking the platial, the experiential, I also lead one to consider the multi-dimensionality of sensory experience, and to extend the many critical debates in screen and media studies that question hierarchies between the sonic and the visual, and instead view such situations as ecological and non-dissociable, such as in the immersive qualities of Hecker’s works. As with Hecker’s in the Chiesa di Santa Cristina, neither the sonic nor the visual may be a priori.26 This is not to deprecate how one sense can be foregrounded or stimulated, but rather, to draw attention to how the senses merge, moving toward what Kay Dickinson has theorized as synaesesthesia.27 Hecker’s performances seem to break out of a simply audiovisual framework. The sense of immersion afforded by a heightened multi-sensory experience allows the audience to participate with and as the work.28 Making this point more obvious is Hecker’s 2010 performance at the Big Ears festival, in Knoxville’s Tennessee Theater, where he performed in total darkness. This is not to say that audio and visual lock-step was, or is ever, blank, or to imply a continued conflict between vision and sound by eliminating former, but to suggest how smell, touch, vibration, and imagination, are ever-present and elemental to musical experience. Similarly, Michel Chion, prolific theorist on the sensoriality of film, observes that experiential contexts that emphasize the visual allow for an enhanced sensorial experience. While I have ruminated on Hecker’s work with a sensorial turn emphasizing film, music, and the body, my concern here is a bit different impulse and response. The YouTube comments accompanying the Chiesa di Santa Cristina video serve as evidence: there are no complaints regarding the concert, the performance, or the experience.

In this context, the screen makes people conscious of the place of the event in a way that is very different from the Pitchfork Festival. Much like a television set situated on the wooden floor of a white-walled gallery projecting a work of video art, Hecker’s laptop screen amplifies a sense of place. While the screen may prompt the work, the screen, performance, Hecker, and the work are a part of a greater totality in which the audience is also entangled. The screen’s materiality matters: its form, its design, its look, its front, its back, et cetera. Our imagination of a screen matters, our mental and physical relation to it, its contextualization.

In experimental electronica performances, such as Hecker’s, this potential of the laptop as a totality works in dialogue with the music. Synchronously, his musical works are in dialogue with place. Hecker’s music both corroborates and challenges perceptions and conditions of media contexts dialogic with spatial surroundings. See Richardson and Gorbanman ‘Introduction,’ The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics, Eds. Richardson, Gorbanman, Verrallis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, page 25.

26 My inquiry into screeness and musical performance is in many ways in line with one of audiovisual studies’ most significant and provocative contributions to the field of new media, the installation art of Nam June Paik. As Mondloch illuminates in her analyses of Paik’s work, the screenic perspective opens up a fascinating critical space that is often neglected or ignored in the study of audiovisual performance. In the case and context of the former, the laptop seems to splinter and bar, while in the latter it invites collaborative and multi-sensory interactions.\footnote{E.g., Mondloch’s discussion of “‘Experiential’,” in “Procedural Imagery: Photography and Memory in Contemporary Installation Art,” Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2012.}

27 His works feature performance places and exploit the nature of specific rooms and halls. Accordingly, many are treated and exhibited as sound installations. There is an audible physicality to his musical constructions, as sound as dynamic “masses” and their cultivation over time; having sound “objects” appear and disappear; differences of and play with contrasting sonic textures such as thick/thin, foreground/background; evolution of color; sonic effects that recall objects, their surfaces, their boundaries; all in essence, quite visceral qualities.

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...having only sound at my disposal has stimulated me to create rich sensations that are no longer just sound sensations but also tactile and trans-sensory. I have often observed that when there is no other way to experience sound, the sound becomes all the sensations and ceases to be “just sound.”

A screen works reciprocally with places informing our perception of experience, and while all performances are multisensory by nature (as all existence is), there is something different between the Pitchfork and Chiesa performances. In the case and context of the former, the laptop seems to splinter and bar, while in the latter it invites collaborative and multi-sensory interactions.\footnote{Mondloch writes extensively on this topic in her book, Framed Spaces: Photography and Memory in Contemporary Installation Art.}
sharing—must have been an amazing experience.”” They do not express any sense of “loss” regarding Hecker’s absence from the video, nor does it fall short of what constitutes satisfactory performativity. Perhaps the YouTube viewer experiences the performance, not simply as mediated through the video, but also as remediated, that is, fundamentally already existing through a lens of screeness.39 Enacting screeness, I would argue that the construct of the video as a static shot then indeed makes sense, as it already implies a scenic perspective whereby an orientation toward Hecker’s screen as a presumed focusality was confounded and then averted. But, this diverging does not speak detrimentally to the performance, rather quite conversely, it speaks directly to it being a platial, multi-sensory, holistic experience.

Sparked by the deeply contested viewpoints regarding performativity in experimental electronica, I offer a different framework for engaging with the music. This paper offers one way of viewing these performances, using the screen as a central hub for extrapolating meaning, as the presence of the screen has an effect on how people experience music in place and vice versa. It might be argued, that I place too much focus on this one element. I would point out, however, that re-focusing on many of the other experiential parameters—for example, on gestures, timbre, or lighting—would still draw us back into discussing the role of the laptop. This approach continues in the direction of theorists who have written extensively on the inescapably mediated nature of performance, taking into consideration the laptop, its screen, and screeness as one rich avenue for examining laptop performances among their very diverse musico-experiential contexts. In doing so, I hope to contribute more nuanced and dynamic understandings in modes of performativity and spectatorship with regard to new media, and specifically here, of experimental electronica performances, which have been so widely and unevenly critiqued. 

REFERENCES


37 I cite ideas of remediation, the evocation and representation of one medium in another, as theorized by Bolten and Grusin in their key text Remediation: Understanding New Media. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.
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