

ARTFORUM

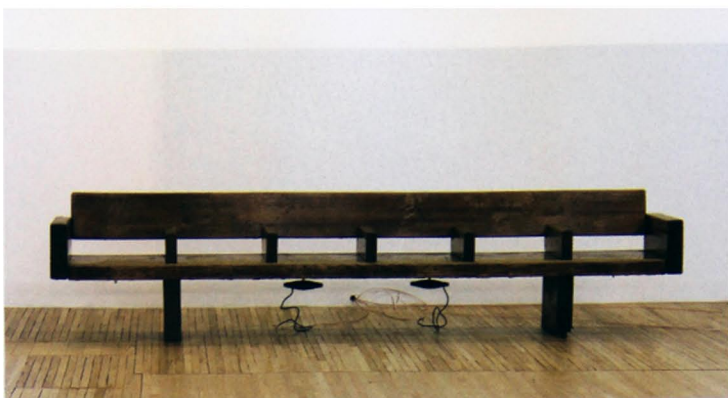
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Sergei Tcherepnin

MURRAY GUY

In his exhibition “Ear Tone Box,” a seven-minute video showed Sergei Tcherepnin idling beneath a crumbling aqueduct at the edge of a sparsely populated plaza in Rio de Janeiro. Dressed in ripped fishnets and a blue cocktail dress, barefoot and sporting an orange bandanna, he appeared to be a lost extra straying from the set of a Pasolini film, or, given his lanky frame, Francis Alÿs in drag. He crouched and paced, occasionally catching a wary glance from a passerby while leaning against the aqueduct’s arches. It all seemed so out of place—not Tcherepnin in his louche getup, but the video itself. Why this silent footage in an exhibition otherwise dedicated to sound art?

My confusion cleared upon learning that Tcherepnin was playing the Pied Piper, a fairy-tale figure of outsized significance in Jacques Attali’s influential 1977 book, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*.



Sergei Tcherepnin, *Motor-Matter Bench*, 2013, wood subway bench, transducers, amplifier, HD media player, 2' 4½" x 10' 6½" x 1' 8½".

A jongleur who plies his skill to rid Hamelin of rats, and who then, when refused payment, wields his instrument to lure away the town’s children, the Pied Piper allegorizes the conscription of music into civic policing and market exchange. To embody the Piper is to embrace music’s morally ambiguous powers—its capacity to charm and enliven, to harm and control.

A critic visiting Tcherepnin’s exhibition with wax-sealed ears would have described him as a sculptor drawing from the legacies of the ready-made and Minimalism. In addition to the aforementioned video, “Ear Tone Box” included a weathered oak subway bench, three rusted rain guards ripped from the exterior of Tcherepnin’s Brooklyn home, two security mirrors set high on the walls of the gallery, and three handsome boxes—one a burlap-wrapped floor piece that flipped open to reveal an *Alice in Wonderland* interior lined with holographic posters, and two cubes that resembled Donald Judd wall pieces, only with the fronts replaced by a diaphanous silk cloth bearing the printed image of Tcherepnin in his Piper outfit. The cubes’ installation over a stool and a windowsill, respectively, encouraged sitting down and sticking one’s head up into their hollow centers.

These disparate objects shared a common element largely obscured from view: surface transducers. Containing powerful magnets, transducers convert electrical signals received through wires into physical vibrations. To startling effect, they make materials sing. An audio recording of metal being shaken emanated straight from the rain guards. Inside the wall cubes, peals of beeps sprang from sheets of copper and zinc. In a looped composition lasting roughly a half hour, Tcherepnin’s sculptures rumbled or chirped to life, then quieted and gave way to new clusters of organized noise. Especially for someone seated on the subway bench, the act of listening grew thick with haptic quivers and head-to-toe jolts.

The transducers’ novelty charged the air with a gee-whiz buzz, but Tcherepnin’s Pied Piper routine struck a cautionary note. Though treated here as sound conductors, the security mirrors and subway bench—topped by armrests that prevent “undesirables” from lying down—were originally designed as subtle instruments of social control. Tcherepnin also borrowed from military strategy: The heavy-duty transducers attached to the six-hundred-pound bench were first developed to simulate tank explosions; the mirrors and boxes deployed musical sequences calculated to produce tones in listeners’ inner ears, a technique for harnessing physiology similar to one described by Friedrich Kittler that steered World War II bomber pilots toward their targets. This was music at its most beguiling and sinister. “Ear Tone Box” promised a future of fully corporeal listening, but portended one of increasingly pervasive and manipulative sound technologies, a further strain on the bereaved citizens of Hamelin.

—Colby Chamberlain