

ROBIN FOX
Proof of Concept

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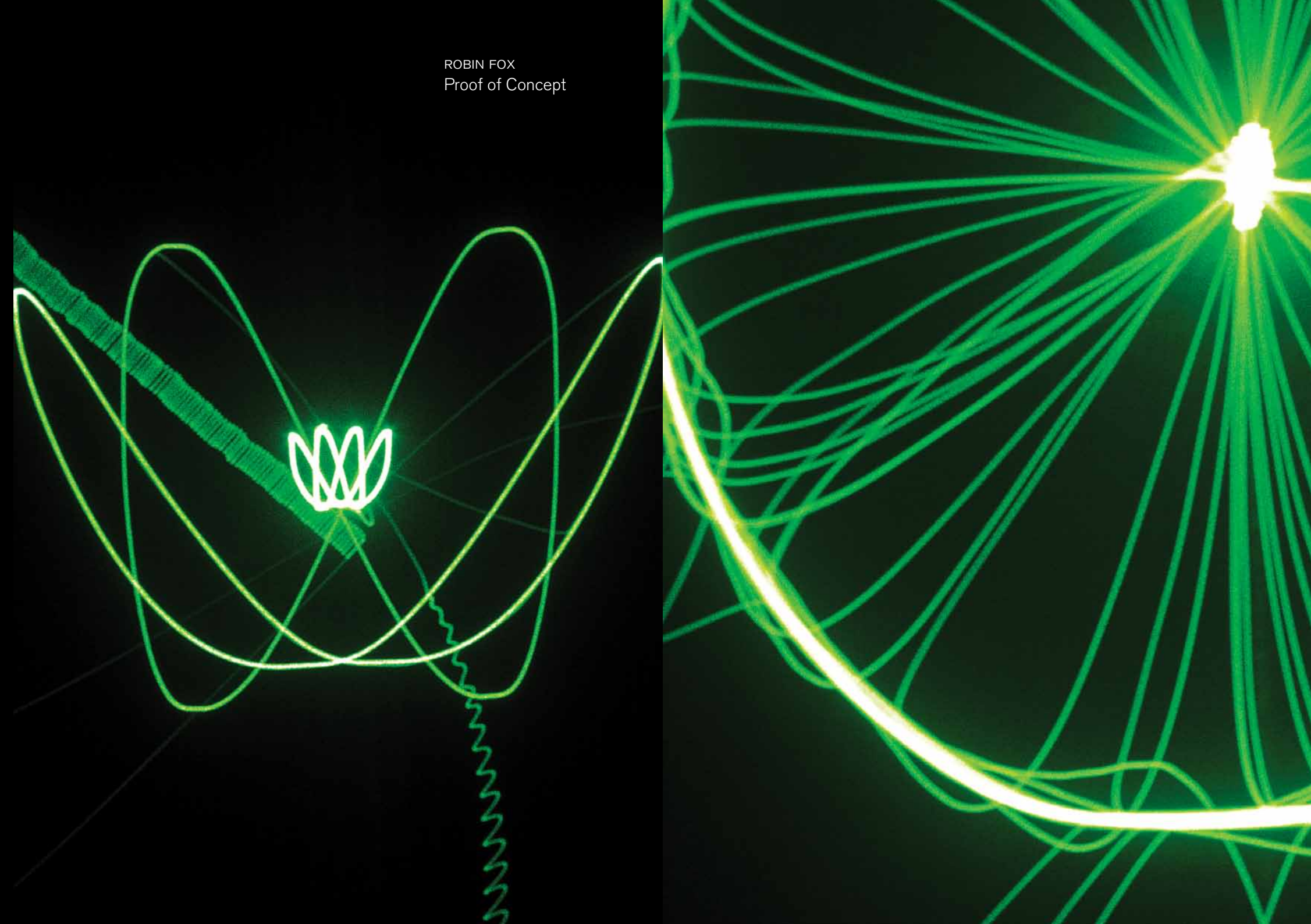
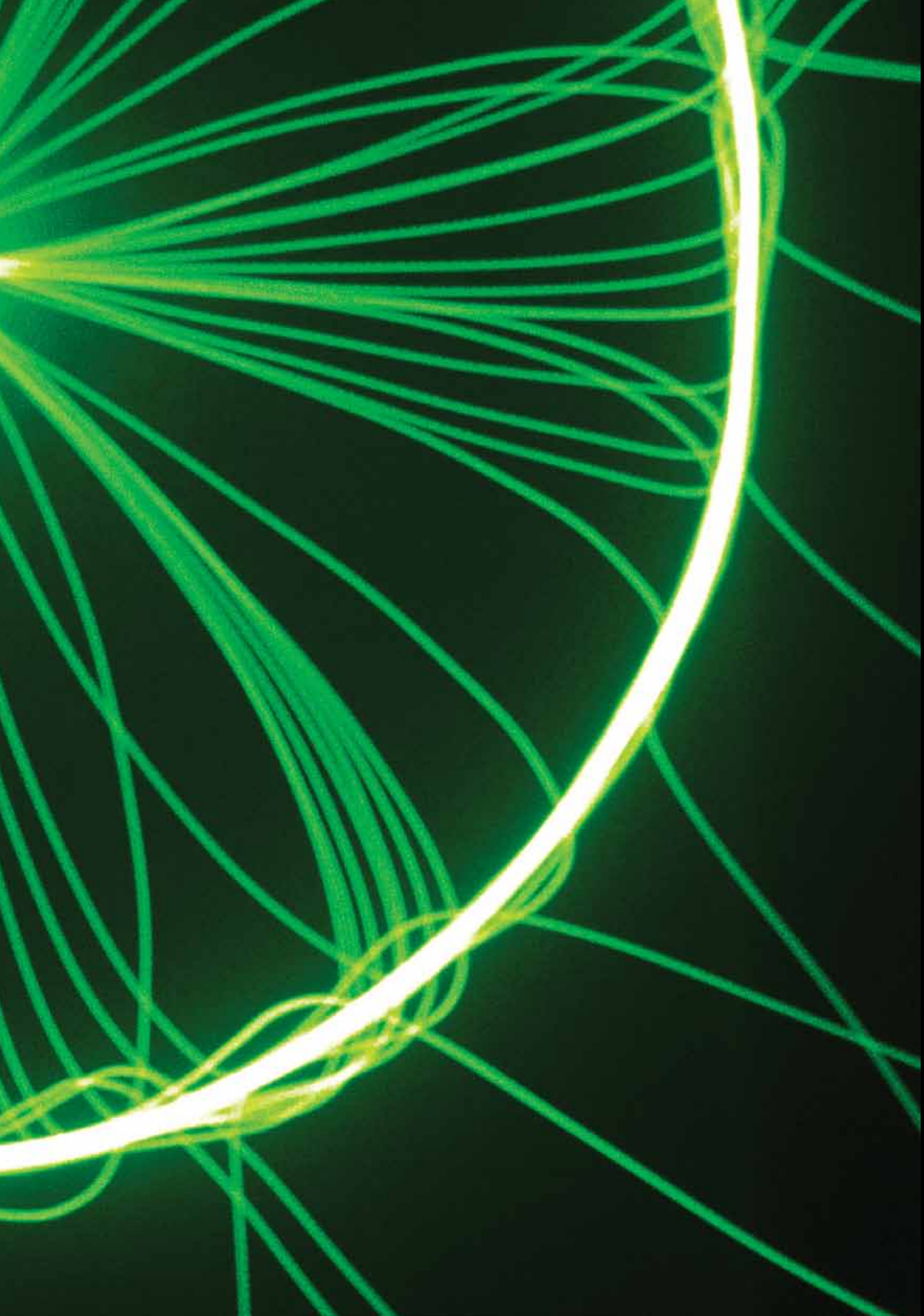


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ROBIN FOX

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'...it is continuous but can't be grasped because man is a discontinuous being.'¹

—Iannis Xenakis

These photographic works by Robin Fox derive from his audio-visual performance practice. Working initially with an oscilloscope and now with a laser, Fox has explored the potential of sound to produce images for a number of years alongside work in live signal processing of instrumentalists² and advanced digital synthesis. In his solo audio-visual performances a laser is powered by digitally synthesised sound produced live using Max/MSP and heard at thundering volumes. In these photographic works, we are left to silently examine infinitesimal moments captured in this process: using the 532 nm laser he uses for his live performances, Fox projected a stream of sound-powered laser formations onto a screen and photographed them, capturing details that could never be grasped by the viewer during performance.

Fox's oscilloscope and laser work rejects the hypothesised relationship between the light

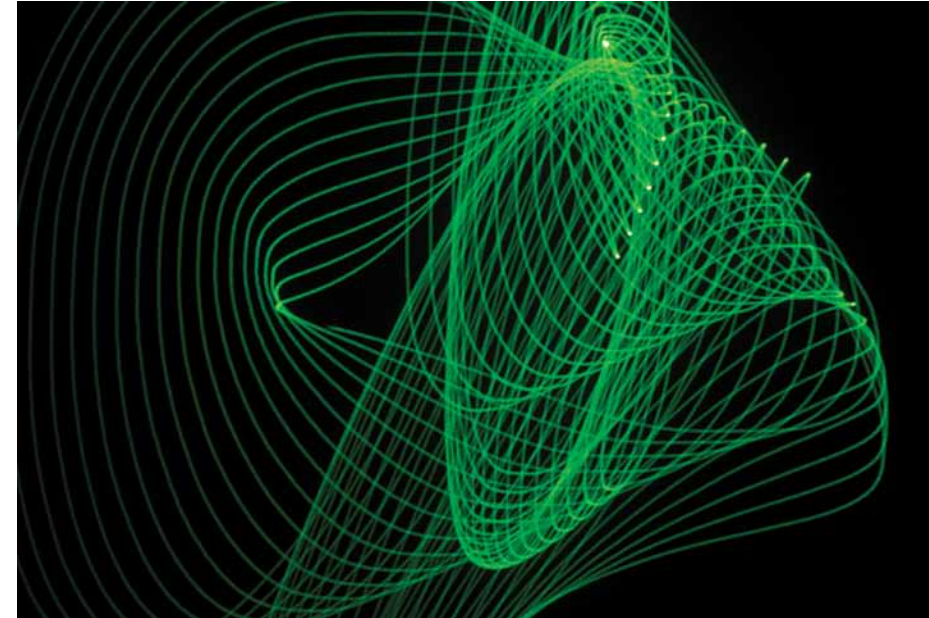
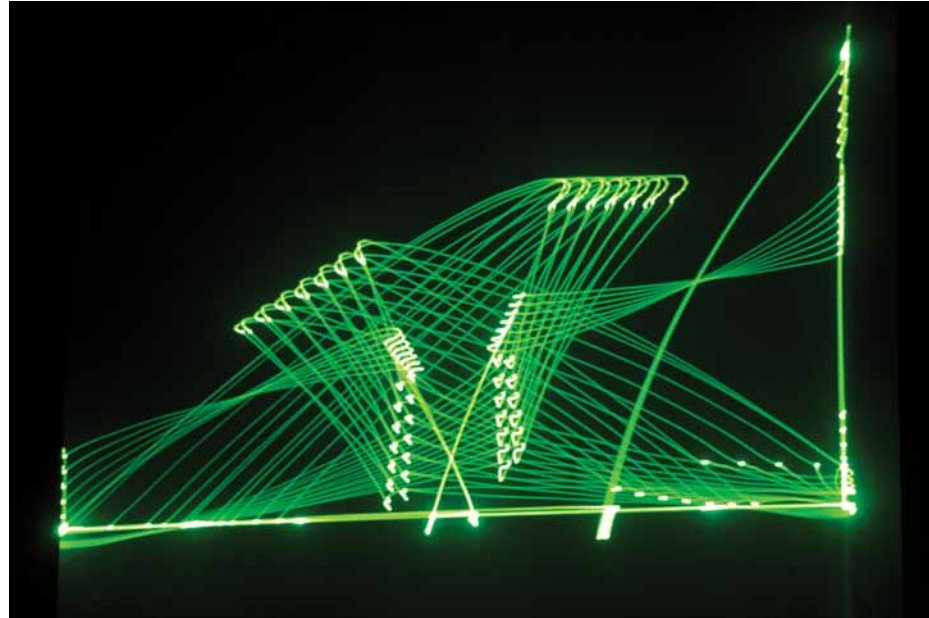
spectrum and sonic frequency range that has underpinned thought on the relation of sound and the visual since Aristotle suggested that 'we may regard all...colours as analogous to the sounds that enter into music, and suppose that all those involving simple numerical ratios, like those in music, may be those generally regarded as most agreeable.'³ The numerous 'colour organs' built from the time of Louis Bertrand Castel to the present are wholly contained within this paradigm and its attendant reductive notion of synaesthesia. In Fox's work on the other hand, the electricity that would usually be channelled to an audio amplifier and cause the speaker cones to vibrate directs the activity of the laser. The link between the sonic and the visual is such that, in the studio where Fox worked on capturing these images without amplifying the audio data that stands behind them (as he would during live performance), the turning of motors inside the laser could be heard to sound the pitches Fox generated in his audio software. The synaesthesia of Fox's work is not that of the colour organ, which maps arbitrary homologies between perceptual stimuli,

but rather it seems 'to play the role of a sign that one has accessed forms no longer belonging to the human organism and its perceptual system'⁴: using electricity, Fox chases after the fleeting interstices between the human senses.

For Fox, computer technology is not an apparatus to be opposed by a naturally creative human subject, but rather a structure at once autonomous and prey to human error that in lucky instances generates inexplicable emergent behaviour, as in the aptly named cathode ray oscilloscope film *Entropy (2nd Law)* (2004) which exploits a bug in certain patches built for Max/MSP that leads to unpredictable results when changing between pre-sets. Cracking electronics, to use the phrase associated with the Swiss improvising duo Voice Crack, is not a question of imposing one's will onto materials in a way that subverts their ordinary function, but rather a matter of heuristically unlocking chaotic potentials in technology. Performance becomes a question of establishing a balance between autonomous technological flows and interventions of human decision. As live electronics pioneer David Tudor said

of the customised electronics he explored in performance, 'I try to find out what's there and not to make it do what I want but to, you know, release what's there'⁵

The sound-image relation Fox presents in his live audio-visual performances is at work in these photographs, silent as they necessarily are. Like Benoît Mandelbrot, Fox exposes the infinite complexity of any seemingly simple object or phenomenon. He offers us a synaesthetic variant of the 'optical unconscious' Walter Benjamin saw activated in photography's ability to present 'image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things'⁶ or the experience John Cage had when listening to the highly amplified small sounds of La Monte Young's *2 Sounds* (1960), which he compared to seeing 'something through a microscope: afterwards, one sees differently, even without a microscope.'⁷ Fox's images give us tools to hear differently: where notated music reifies a certain set of frequencies into a group of objects, in Fox's work even a single sine tone is revealed to be an abstraction from an 'immense number of events'.⁸ In the representations given



to us by the oscilloscope or Fox's laser, the material reality of sound appears as a massive complexity that always transcends human perception. Fox's work can be placed in a lineage of thought and art that has attempted to attain a heightened awareness of the infinitely complex and 'vibratory nature of matter'⁹ that includes Nietzsche, Bergson, Mandelbrot, Xenakis and Lucier. If we are usually caught between the antimonious realities of the everyday perception of objects and qualities and science's world of matter and energy¹⁰, Fox's freeze-frame aestheticisation of the complexity of sound gestures towards a space between these two realities. In a somewhat hubristic moment, Xenakis located the import of art in its ability to conquer 'domains that lie outside science at the same time as claiming fields that they do cover.'¹¹ Fox's work inhabits this exact space, attempting a modification of our basic attunement to material reality not through rational scientific discourse but rather as 'revelation, intuition'¹², as an experiment without truth.

Francis Plagne

Notes

- 1 Iannis Xenakis, *Arts/Sciences: Alloys*, translated by Sharon Kanach, Pendragon Press: New York, 1985, p. 73.
- 2 Most notably his work with Anthony Pateras and Clayton Thomas.
- 3 See Aristotle, *Sense and Sensibilia*, 439^b30–440^a5.
- 4 Robin Mackay, 'Haswell & Hecker: Blackest Ever Black', in *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development* 3, Urbanomic: Falmouth, 2007, p. 127.
- 5 David Tudor cited in *David Tudor and Larry Austin: A Conversation* www.emf.org/tudor/Articles/austin.html.
- 6 Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography' (1931) in *Selected Writings*, volume 2, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Belknap Press: Cambridge and London, 1996, p. 512.
- 7 See Branden W. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage*, Zone Books: New York, 2008, pp.112–4.
- 8 Quentin Meillassoux, 'Subtraction and Contraction: Deleuze, Immanence, and Matter and Memory', in *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development* 3, Urbanomic: Falmouth, 2007, p. 79.
- 9 Ibid p. 82.
- 10 See Meillassoux, 'Subtraction and Contraction', p. 83.
- 11 Bálint András Varga, *Conversations with Iannis Xenakis*, Faber and Faber: London, 1996, p. 113.
- 12 Ibid p. 113.

Biography

Robin Fox is an artist straddling the often artificial divide between audible and visible arts. As an audio-visual performance artist his work has featured in festivals worldwide. Recent appearances include a commissioned performance for the Henie Onstad Kunstcenter, Oslo (March 2010); Mois Multi Festival, Quebec City (February 2010); Steirischer Herbst Festival, Graz (November 2009); Musica Genera Festival, Warsaw (June 2009); and the Yokohama Triennale (September 2008). His audio-visual films for the cathode ray oscilloscope are documented on the DVD release *backscatter* (2004) with more recent works *Volta* and *5 Creation Myths* being exhibited as video works at RoslynOxleyg Gallery, Sydney; Asian Art Biennale, Taipei; and Miniartextil, Como.

His groundbreaking work with Chunky Move has contributed to the recent work *Mortal Engine* winning a Helpmann Award for Best Visual Production and an Honorary mention at the illustrious Prix Ars Electronica. Fox's music—both solo and in collaboration—has been released on Australian and European labels and he is currently engaged in a research project with the Bionic Ear Institute composing music for cochlear implant wearers.

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COVER

Proof of Concept #18 2010 (detail)
type C print
118 × 166 cm

INSIDE

Proof of Concept #13 2010 (detail)
type C print
118 × 166 cm

THIS PAGE — LEFT TO RIGHT

Proof of Concept #14 2010
type C print
118 × 166 cm

Proof of Concept #17 2010
type C print
118 × 166 cm