

TONSPUR 82:  
Nerve Theory (Bernhard Loibner & Tom Sherman)  
“Electric Cars and Electric Guitars“  
TONSPUR für einen öffentlichen raum 2019

“Electric Cars and Electric guitars” is a project born from a cooperation between Austrian sound artist Bernhard Loibner and American-Canadian media artist Tom Sherman. Initially brought together by Austrian radio journalist and Ö1-Kunstradio founder Heidi Grundmann they formed the duo Nerve Theory in the nineteen-nineties, and as such have worked together for over 20 years on various radio pieces, video works and live performances.

Their new work is an audio installation composed by Loibner for an 8-channel setup that centers around the script and narration of Sherman. The eponymous «electric guitars» are the first sounds we hear in this piece, and they do sound like dust and dirt, as Loibner apparently borrowed heavily from desert rock aesthetics. As the first chords strum along, Sherman’s voice laconically introduces the piece. “*Listen: Electric Cars and Electric Guitars.*” And inevitably an image is evoked: one of a desert landscape, stretching left and right for kilometers; us sitting in a car; Sherman on the steering wheel, telling us about the journey we’re about to undertake; us gazing out of the window while barren shrubbery and rocky peaks pass in the distance as we race down a straight highway. Loibner paints the landscape, Sherman drives us through.

As such “Electric Cars and Electric Guitars” *feels* like a road movie — both from its mood, as well as its narrative structure. Sonically it evokes images of a journey that starts off on the highway in some dusty nothingness, follows the road into the city, peaks in urban space, possibly somewhere in the future, only to end in a new kind of nothingness. As we follow down our path, our vessel develops, receiving tech-upgrades at full speed while our gaze gradually wanders from outside of the vehicle inwards, ultimately provoking change within ourselves. The world around us transforms with us, but since our gaze has shifted, our focus lies elsewhere.

The piece has a remarkably analogue sonic aesthetic in comparison with Loibner’s previous work. The dominant instruments are the electric guitar and later on analogue synthesizers. However appearances are deceiving — the Analogue is only the surface. Just like the electric car, which takes the shape of a classical combustion vehicle but is composed of a myriad of electronic components on the inside, the music shifts and transforms into a vast cyberpunk scenery as we progress into the piece and electronic bleeps and digital effects emerge. The desert rock elements get extended with dashes of krautrocky synth-arpeggios, complemented with Loibner’s signature granular sustain sounds. The multichannel nature of the piece serves well to describe the vastness of the scenery.

As Sherman guides us through, he tells us a tale of a near future where computers change the face of mobility, while establishing a connection between electric cars and electric guitars. “*Both can take us places*” he remarks. The parallel between electric cars and electric guitars might seem arbitrary at first, but comes full circle when the logical step from electric transportation to autonomous vehicles is made and Sherman announces the fruits of the prospects of this new mobility: finally, we will be able to play our electric guitars while being driven around by our autonomous electric cars. However at the latest after 10 minutes into the piece these prospects take a sinister turn when it is extended with a political angle, as the autonomous vehicles become smart beings, and ultimately, possible villains. “*Watch out and get out of the way, when electric cars **decide** to cross your path.*” he says, exposing potential will and agency of the artificial intelligence. This example of the personification of the car illustrates Sherman’s narration style quite well. As he recites with a sonorous voice he appears at times a prophet, at other times a joker, as irony blinks through the serious facade.

The work unfolds in many dimensions: The journey in the moving vehicle and the evolution of the vehicle itself can be read as an allegory for processes of exploration and settlement in historic contexts; the frontier in this case being society, as it is being penetrated by technology. Exploration, settlement, exploitation, consolidation and finally inner differentiation; all these stages are described by both the narration as well as the music. As the focus is shifted inwards from outside the speed apparently decelerates; but no, our reference points previously located in the distance are now to be found inside the cabin. Density has increased, as such physical distances have grown relatively, but our minds dissolve in a computer controlled interconnectedness. Our responsibilities are taken over by machines for the sake of comfort. By this point the soundtrack has changed. Electronics have replaced the raw guitars as primary musical element. Sonically we have already entered the computer by now. Abstract beats evoke images of nineteen-eighties sci-fi aesthetics. Are we still in the car or have we entered the simulation?

“Electric Cars and Electric Guitars” can be both understood literally as well as metaphorically. The electric cars of this piece are just as much real vehicles as they are symbols for a loss of control and the dawn of a new Cyber-Biedermeier, which might just as well end in the *Matrix*, if things go wrong. Though “Electric Cars and Electric Guitars” never takes an openly ludditic stance, clear warnings are uttered and concerns raised as we face consequences that we might be unprepared for. Some of these belong in the realm of Science Fiction, others are already in effect in real life, leading to

inevitable moral dilemmas that we have to face. As such the topic of smart mobility is just a placeholder for a manifold of complex interconnected issues that arise as technology percolates our lives.

As “Electric Cars and Electric Guitars” nears its end, the music calms; the wild buzzing of electronics and roaring guitars fades and calm but suspenseful sustained chords fill the air. The sound is clean. It is driven by a subtle but steady beat; a pulse, akin to concrete slabs that pass under the vehicle. We are still on the move, but it is no more the exploration of the outside that we long for. We have turned inward. *Some* peace has arrived, but a vague feeling of threat remains.

C. Hausch, 2019/20