MIDDLE EAST TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

SOCIOLOGY OF WORK AND ORGANIZATION
ASSIGNMENT:

UNDERSTANDING AN INTERESTING/DISAPPEARING/NEW OCCUPATION

ELECTRONIC MUSICAL INSTRUMENT ARTISANSHIP

Alparslan Teke
2142032

SPRING 2018

1. Introduction

Drawing on e-mail interviews conducted with four artists and digital ethnography in relevant sites, this paper introduces electronic luthiers; people who build electronic musical devices. This was an interesting topic since people who occupy themselves with it seem to be dealing in a creative spirit with two hardships; being a craftsman in contemporary society and being experimental musicians in spite of the culture industry. Myself being a dilettante in the subject field, this occupation with its several market relations, relative autonomy, problem-solving and knowledge-sharing communities and significant aesthetic-politic implications led me to attempt locating it among the sociological literature.

To introduce briefly, capabilities of electricity in terms of producing sound started being explored in late 19th century. Its musical implementations required a cooperation of at least a musician and an engineer in the first half of 20th century, among closed circles both in USA and Europe. This requirement of merging two distinct occupations with the presence of people from each was mostly due to scarcity of knowledge of and input sources for electronics. Gradually, magazines such as Radio Electronics (1948-1992, USA) and other printed media demystified electronics, and this role is being played by Internet for almost a quarter century now, faster and making knowledge reachable around the globe. Especially on the USA side, technical knowledge on electronics spread more widely and quickly and this led to a type of 'musician inside electronics', as epitomized by Composers Inside Electronics, a "group of composer/performers dedicated to the composition and live collaborative performance of electronic and electro-acoustic music using both software and circuitry designed and constructed by individual composers" ("Composers Inside Electronics", n.d.). At the dawn of the millennium, formerly scarce resources of knowledge and input supply were already abundant.

Different from other musicians inside electronics who are mostly from engineering background employed for a salary in multinational corporations that produce a limited variety of electronic musical instruments in large quantities, subject occupation of this paper is self-employed, does not produce in comparable quantities, decide what to produce on their own and most of the time has no commercial mediator. This distinguishes them both from musicians and engineers by being craftsmen in the very sense Richard Sennett defines it; "craftsman represents the special human condition of being engaged" (Sennett, 2008, p.20). Extent of this engagement will be one of major focuses of the discussion part, and aesthetic-politic implications are hoped to be indicated meanwhile through emphasizing the creative activity as a means of all-round development of individual.

2. Data collection

Without geographical constrains, I conducted structured interviews via email with people from different countries. I sent preliminary emails to ten artisans, received four positive feedbacks. All the people I contacted I found via internet, and they all sell at least one electronic musical device they've made on the websites I found them and obtained contact info from. Then I sent four interviewees the questionnaire I prepared which consisted of 13 questions. Questions of mine and the corresponding variables indicated in "guide for writing final report" can be seen in Appendix 1.

Confining the discussion solely to few yet fruitful interviews seemed unfair in the condition of availability of information I seek on the Internet. For the sake of drawing a comprehensive picture of, say, methods of selling devices or their perception about their work and products; I scanned some websites of electronic musical device artisans where first-hand reflections on their artistry is available and they sell what they produce, and the forums where mainly exchange of technical information and creation ideas are being made which is a means for cultivating skills for our craftsman (for an example of self-distribution of self-made products see http://shop.musicfromouterspace.com/cart/Catalog%20MFOS, for an example community http://electro-music.com/forum/forum-112.html)

3. Analysis

First interviewee runs a brand named BugBrand, they produce effects devices and synthesizers and sells them through the same domain name on the Internet. They are from UK and even has a UK Value Added Tax Registration for the devices they produce.

Second interviewee is sound artist, composer, and instrument designer based in Vienna, Austria. They are the founder and owner of SubtleNoiseMaker, "a one-person business building unique, fascinating weird sounding sonic devices", in their own words.

Third respondent is a French graphic designer and photographer who lives in Istanbul and initiated MusicWithMachines to modify electronic instruments and produce electronic musical paraphernalia on order. This interviewee converges from others by focusing on modifying existing instruments with the same aesthetic motivations, and nevertheless they don't have a regular production schedule, they build electronic musical paraphernalia on order. Their contribution however has a different importance because they shed light on the possibilities and boundaries of this occupation on Turkey well.

Finally, last of them is a sound + light artist based in Helsinki & Berlin, "whose current interests include DIY electronics, audiovisual instrument building, the relationship between sound and space, media archaeology, and participatory art forms. They have performed live, taught workshops and created scores of unique instruments and installations since 2002 across Europe, North and South America, and New Zealand", in their own words.

Although two of them have a background in electronics, all the interviewees are self-educated for what made them the subject of this discussion. Internet as a source of knowledge and inspiration is a common reference by all the interviewees. In one interview, they marked an important point on how they cultivated skills by merging the information they've obtained through internet forums and the handwork as trial and error.

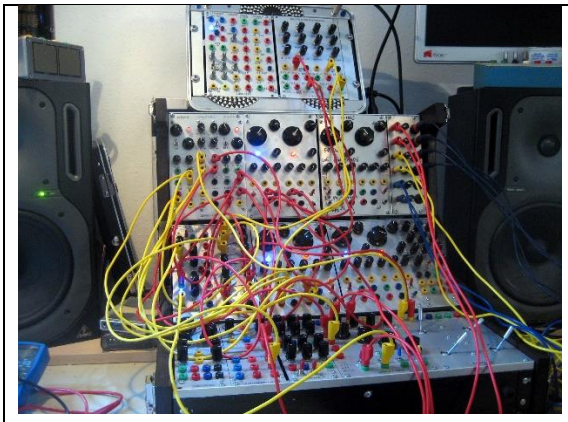
"When musicians go to a shop and buy the latest Roland or Korg, they just take the music in the middle of the process I think, instead of taking it from the beginning. When you go and buy a robot or a machine or electronic device, you just forget half of the pleasure. It's good to start with the origin and design your own sound sources and then play with them" (Pierre Bastian interviewed by Svetlana Maras, quoted by one of the interviewees on their website, "Experimental Sound Instruments"). This quotation of an electro-acoustic music pioneer I guess marks the common point of departure for all of the interviewees. Disappointment with the conventional instruments, which is inversely proportionate to the boundaries one draws while defining music is a common impetus for 'taking control of [one's] own tools and wrestling them away from the traditional music world'. This way of having control on what one's instrument is, how it operates and what it produces is a source of fulfilment for all.

Half of interviewees organized their labor in this craft as a serious focus for making a living. This is one of theirs full time occupation, another spends one third of their time to making instruments for sale, one discontinued production 4 years ago and the last one doesn't depend on it at all since they consider this artistry as a hobby, rather than an occupation. Last half has other occupations that provide their livelihood. It can be said that all of our respondents (one of them formally) are independent contractors, they are self-employed and are "not capable of appropriating surplus value produced by labor but represent instead a form of disguised wage labor whose only capital is their tools, materials, and special expertise" (Kalleberg, 2000, p.355). They share an economic risk but one of them was able to find affluent conditions at some point to employ

some people even, and another one asserts that this craft and related activities are enough to make themselves a living. In terms of commerce, many electronic luthiers sell their instruments at different stages of assembling for different prices, which is illustrated with one example from the website Music From Outer Space in the table. It must also be noted that this website also provides tons of schematics, guides and troubleshooting manuals for the instruments developed by them (namely, Ray Wilson) to be built by anyone without being have to buy anything from the developer. Implications of this in terms of peer production practices will be touched upon below.

Price	Goods
$20	• only circuit board
$55	• circuit board • front plate
$65	• circuit board • components
$95	• circuit board • front plate • components

When it comes to their perception of instruments they've made, we see some intriguing concepts and variety of perceptions. Two of the respondents preferred to use very similar words to describe the instruments they make; chaotic/messy, generative/evolving, unfocused/intuitive, multifocused/multimodal, and non-linear.



"Macumbista Modular", a modular synthesizer by an interviewee

BugBrand's Chirper, a semi-modular synthesizer

Founder of MusicWithMachines vividly informs us about two distinct schools of instrument building on the same question, one with a punk approach and the other with an engineer's. They

are positioned among the latter, who “tr[ies] to give a professional finishing to your machines, something very clean, studied, engineered”.

Sixth question I directed to learn about related activities they do revealed another separation into halves. Two respondent’s lives are intertwined with work and other activities than instrument building are closely connected to this field, such as performing with self-made instruments or conducting workshops on the subject. They also consider instrument building as their profession, and another similarity is observable in terms of working environment. Their initial workshop was embedded in the place they live in, but after a while they separated where they live and where they produce. Other two who do not define this craft as their profession has a separate field of activities as a pharmaceutic company employee on the one hand and a graphic designer on the other. None of the respondents have a physical shop or a mediator, all exchange activities are done through internet and nevertheless existence of a music scene where such an interest towards unique instruments may arise in the country one lives in is a determinate factor in one’s possibility of making a livelihood out of this craft. Lack of demand in İstanbul determines one interviewee’s approach to this skill of theirs, and plentiful demand on Northern Europe leads another’s, who is considering incorporating commercial instrument building in their art as a subsistence source. In terms of nature of contract, scale varies from one build by one order to batch-based production.

One of the respondents who settled their production program is unsurprisingly get in contact with part suppliers and PCB houses where the devices they constructed are produced in batches mostly. Another one mostly interact with workshop participants and point out to the fact that there is no typical participant, it can be young and old alike, people from all over the world.

Evans’ and Lilly’s discussion on technology as a problem for capitalism can be traced through peer production practices with each of the respondents (Evans & Lily, 2016, pp.663-665). On the one hand, all spend their time on forums and websites where exchange of knowledge on building instruments is made by many participants from a wide range of professions. Furthermore, this production practice is in its very tangible form when workshops are conducted where instruments are built by each participant. In another interview, they explain the significance of and their affinity towards participatory production in detail (Chardronnet, 2015). Their discussion and interviewee’s answer converge where both authors of the article and our interviewee make mention of prosuming. However, as it will be approached with doubt that an orchestra oboist consumes an oboe during a concert, it must simply be more than consuming what one produces in the case of a musician choosing to build their instrument rather than buying one available as a commodity in

the market. “Since available options are often dictated by what genres of sound are currently popular, you have people seeking out tools to help them make the same kinds of music they listen to already—a kind of self-perpetuating commercial loop” (Chardronnet, 2015).

4. Conclusion

Smallness of the number of interviewees, dispersion of them on the spectrum from hobby to full-time work, method of structured interview, and a concern to keep within the boundaries of course material led this one to be an on-surface exploration article. It has a couple of confused last words though. Data collected through an in-depth and ecological method on musicians who play the instruments they made in their performances and also rely on selling self-made instruments as a subsistence source, if analyzed through an incorporation of sociology of work, music, and consumption, would indicate to a contrast between those who are embedded in the mass production and culture at all steps of musical activity from obtaining an instrument to performing for payment. This would require as far as I’m concerned, which sadly suffers from the lack of art courses offered in our department, a critical approach. Perhaps one may speak of the aura of the self-made instrument as does Walter Benjamin of the painting, or performing with it as the opposite to the activity of musician of jazz of masses Adorno abhors because of its similarities to Fordist production model. Or from a broader scope, evaluation of individual fulfilment in terms of labor, nature and human nature as Marx defines them. On this horizon, it would also be possible to follow the traces of any rupture between doing and done, or production, product and producer, when performing with the self-made instrument and then designing or modifying it with the light of performance experience creates a feedback loop. Last but not least, a discussion on the relationship between art and craft could have been done thoroughly.

REFERENCES

Composers Inside Electronics. (n.d.) Retrieved from http://composers-inside-electronics.net/cie/cie/cie_home.html

Sennett, R. (2008) *The Craftsman.* New Haven & London: Yale University Press

Kalleberg, A. L. 2009. "Precarious Work, Insecure Workers: Employment Relations in Transition." American Sociological Review. 74: 1-22.

Evans, P., and C. Tilly. 2016. "The future of work: Escaping the current dystopian trajectory and building better alternatives." S. Edgell, GH, & E. Granter (Eds.), The sociology of work and employment: 651-671.

Macumbista: Noise+Art+Technology, Respondent Derek Holzer's website retrieved from http://macumbista.net

--"Interview for Middle East Technical University", http://macumbista.net/?p=5225

--"Experimental Sound Instruments", http://macumbista.net/?page_id=1187

Holzer Interview with Ewen Chardronnet, (2015), *"My interest in instruments fabrication reflects the artist's economic reality"*.

BugBrand. http://www.bugbrand.co.uk

Sascha Neudeck. http://www.sascha-neudeck.com/INFOS.htm

Appendix 1: Questions and corresponding variables

1.How did you start making or altering electronic musical devices?	Job definition
2.In which relevant fields were you educated?	
3.What were your motivations and/or purposes when you started, and (how) did they transform?	Expectations from the worker
4.Do you consider this artistry (of making electronic/electroacoustic musical instruments) as your profession? If not, do you have any else?	Worker's perception about her/his work performance
5.What words or concepts would you use to describe things you've created?	
6.What related activities do you do that are directly or indirectly related to this occupation? (such as using the devices you made in performances, conducting workshops, etc.)	Social relations
7.Where and how do you get your ideas that end up with different devices?	Essence of creativity
8.Where and how do you get your raw material or components?	Market relations
9.How much time of a day or week (or a month, a year) do you spend on the workbench? Do you have a working schedule?	Working schedule
10.What time of this is actually building something, and in which other ways you spend time there? Would you confine your occupation of creating new musical devices to only the activities you do on the workbench?	Working schedule
11.Do you have a separate workshop to maintain your effort, or is it embedded in the place you live in?	Working environment
12.Do you produce in large quantities? Do you use the devices you`ve made, or do you sell them? If you do sell, do you have a cost/profit formulation? Does this occupation provide you a livelihood?	Nature of contract, market relations, presence of payment
13.With whom do you most frequently interact as part of this occupation of yours?	Social relations