

[Continuous Partial Listening: Holly Herndon in Conversation](#)

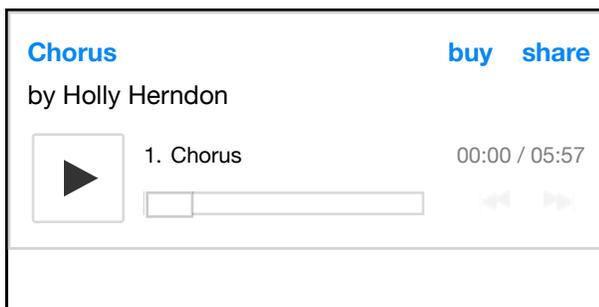
[Ceci Moss](#) | Wed Jan 22nd, 2014 10:30 a.m.



After completing her informal education in Berlin's underground club scene, artist and musician [Holly Herndon](#) relocated to the Bay Area to pursue an MFA at Mills College's esteemed music program. Now continuing her studies in computer-based music at Stanford, Herndon has an inquisitive approach to technology, finding common threads among often-divided disciplines and communities: electronic music, academia, the tech

sector, and contemporary art. As a result, her work is not easily categorized, whether she's composing music for brass ensembles or working on robotic sculptures with artist Conrad Shawcross, touring festivals in Europe or making dance music with heavily processed recordings of the human voice. This week, she released a 12" entitled [Chorus on RVNG Intl.](#)

Ceci Moss: Your new 12" *Chorus* comes out this week. The title track recalls the experience of continuous partial attention in online browsing, using audio samples derived from your own daily browsing. *Chorus* begins chaotically, taking form with the addition of percussion. Could you discuss the ideas behind this composition? Also, what did you use to sample your browsing history, and how did you technically create the track?



Holly Herndon: The idea was to try to try and represent the hard cuts and sharp transitions between environments in online browsing. This is executed most obviously with the *musique concrète* technique at the beginning and middle of the track, but I've also embedded a lot in the composition as a whole. In the production on the voice, I would cut my words off and interrupt myself with hard edits and then sing over those lines, which creates an unusual vocal effect, almost as if one of the voices is struggling through a Skype connection while the other completes the phrase. I also think that the marriage of styles happening throughout the track is pretty reflective of the new coherence I find with disparate sound sources running on my computer at any given time.

Technically, I used several different techniques, one of the most prominent being the "net-concrete" system that Mat Dryhurst built for his [Dispatch lecture](#) performance with PAN last summer. It's basically a Max patch that samples and smashes content from your browser, with the intention of creating work from browsing. His argument is that in a time where you are equally likely to make no money from a song, a tweet, or a video, no one online expression should be prioritized over another, and as a result each online expression has equal transformative potential. In that scenario, we need to observe all expressions from an artist over time to get an accurate understanding of their work, which redefines both the construction of online personas and the browsing experience of understanding them as time-based media or exploded compositions.

It's worth noting that I asked artist Adam Harvey to remix the track instead of [doing] a traditional musical dance remix. He worked with [designer/researcher] Simone Niquille to create an interactive website, which will be released soon. I'm really excited to see what

they developed.

CM: Let's talk about the new music video for "Chorus." Directed by programmer and artist Akihiko Taniguchi, the video uses his *Study of real-time 3D internet* experiment, which allows the user to surf the internet within a 3D simulated environment of her own actual desktop in real time, using Kinect, openFrameworks, and Syphon Recorder. The video roams across different 3D renderings of physical and computer desktops, creating a landscape that incorporates both. As the music picks up, consumer items like Tide, cough medicine, and sponges float across the screen. What was the concept behind the video, and how did you end up working with Akihiko?

HH: I started working with Akihiko when I began incorporating video into my live performance. There is certainly pressure to present an AV performance, but I didn't want to just slap up some found footage or a fixed media piece; that seemed at odds with how I perform. I loved that Akihiko creates his own software that is performable. So, when I play live, usually Mat Dryhurst, who introduced me to Akihiko's work, will perform the patch in real time, responding to the music. This led to the collaboration for the video. It was really fun because I don't speak Japanese and his English is better in written form, so we would chat on Skype, looking at each other, but typing and using Google Translate.

We really wanted to capture the intimate workspaces that people have, sort of behind the online glossy image. I've talked a lot about my personal relationship to my laptop, so it is a nice extension to show other people's hyper-personalized spaces, all with a shared window into online life and an interplay on who is watching who.

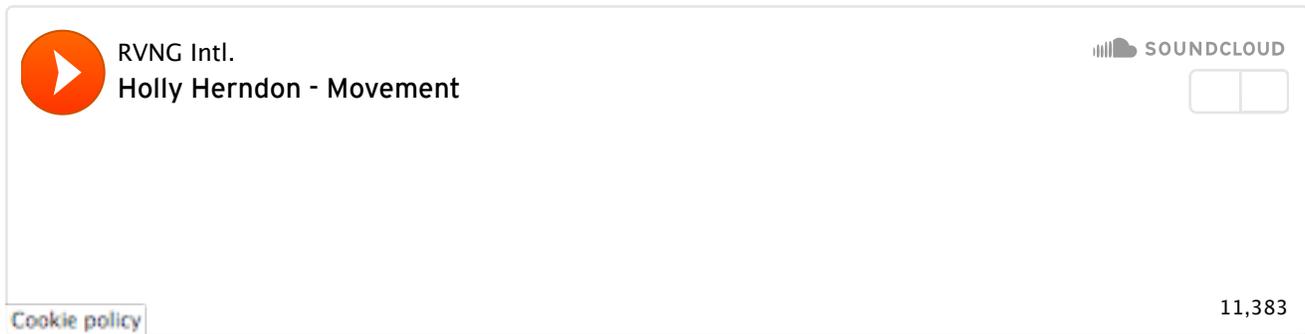
The footage from the beginning is especially funny because it is unstaged Skype material that Mat video captured while away on a residency in Lisbon. At times it's really close and intimate, but also goofy, like when I'm restlessly playing with the chair in our living room.

Akihiko Taniguchi [video] and Holly Herndon [music], *Chorus* (2014). Taniguchi: "One of the most striking contemporary images is that of the desktop capture, which is seen commonly on YouTube as part of software tutorials. I like the shots of desktops that are poorly organized and 'lived-in.'"

CM: Voice was a central theme for your last release, *Movement*. With tracks like "Terminal," the album not only featured your own human voice, reworked by instruments and effects in MAX/MSP, but sounds of the hard drive itself. It seems like you're trying to elaborate a sensibility that plays with the correspondence between the organic qualities of the human voice and its processing.

HH: The marriage of the voice and computer in *Movement* was a natural progression for me, once I embraced the laptop as my primary instrument. I was raised in choirs and am somewhat comfortable improvising, providing a variety of input data for my computer. At the time, I was grappling with issues of laptop performance and saw incorporating the voice as a way to create audience empathy and an embodied performance experience. I was trying to find a gestural and fleshy approach to digital music without falling back on clichés of emotion in music.

My laptop affords me an unprecedented level of detailed control over the voice in real time, and as a result I construct patches to augment and transform aspects of the voice in an attempt to uncover new perspectives and identities from a familiar source. I play a lot with gender on that record—it is incredibly liberating to be able to manipulate my voice to be two octaves deeper, to sound like a car crash or a rhythm section. The history of vocal processing, with admirable exceptions, has often served to compound gender stereotypes, and yet the availability of tools like Max/MSP opens up this possibility of exploding gender and identity in ways I find quite exciting.



The image shows a SoundCloud player interface. On the left, there is a red play button icon followed by the text "RVNG Intl." and "Holly Herndon - Movement". On the right, there is a SoundCloud logo and a small rectangular button. At the bottom left, there is a "Cookie policy" link, and at the bottom right, the number "11,383" is displayed.

CM: Could you discuss your approach to live performance in more depth? In a text accompanying the track "[Dilato](#)," you argue that all electronic music is embodied, and that there's a need to theorize a posthumanist approach to recording and performance that does away with the divide between embodied performance and disembodied recording. How do you negotiate this concept within the experiences you create, either through recording or performance?

HH: This is something I was dealing with a lot during my time at Mills. I was hearing people argue that computer music performance was disembodied and therefore disengaging for the audience. So I started asking myself why. What is the definition of embodied performance? What does an audience need in order to palpably share the same time/space as the performer? In theory, it shouldn't matter what instrument, gesture, or technique the performer is using, and yet this bias lingers. In reading N. Katherine Hayles, it helped clarify recording as the inscription of symbols and performance as the incorporation of symbols. I do think there is a big difference between performance and recording, but I do not think there is a huge difference between acoustic and electronic performance in regards to embodiment or audience engagement per se. It is less about the medium and more about the act or intent, and there is a lot of ground to cover to instantiate that awareness.

CM: The car is another recurring subject in your work. Your first album *CAR* was composed for listening within a car, and your collaboration with Mat Dryhurst for Semcon's [Sonic Movement](#) installation crafts pedestrian warning sounds for silent electric vehicles. Cars are such ubiquitous environments, reminiscent of what Marc Augé once termed a "non-place." How do you compose for that space? What effect or feeling are you trying to produce?

HH: Since I started commuting 50 minutes south to Silicon Valley every day, I have thought a lot about the interior of my car as both a private and a public space and written music specifically for my Toyota Matrix. Driving on the highway feels like an exploded social experience—spread apart and sped up, with everyone wearing complicated exteriors that keep us further away from each other. Communication is simplified into symbols and gestures. All the while each person is sharing a visual landscape and experiencing an entirely different sonic environment. I'm interested in how this public/private experience

may be augmented through sound. *CAR* plays with the sounds that are shared amongst drivers, as well as private interior moments.

Sonic Movement is a collaborative project that I did with Mathew Dryhurst along with Fernando Ocana, James Brooks, and E2Sound of Semcon. For this project we were asked to rethink the sound design of electric vehicles (EV). EVs are eerily quiet and pose a safety risk, and as a result we are starting to see legislation being drafted to dictate what an EV ought to sound like—with many of the suggestions referencing the antiquated (and disruptive) sounds of the mechanical engine. This is why the timing on this project is so crucial. If the parameters are chosen without first looking at the entire scale of possibilities we now have for EV sound design, we could end up with another siren sound, AKA a sound that is derived from its mechanical history, but not necessarily the most effective (or interesting) communication tool. In *Sonic Movement* we are developing a new logic of thinking about EV sound design—rather than any one specific sound, we are developing a system to enable these vehicles to respond intelligently to their environments. Just as I like to compose music that utilizes the unprecedented capabilities of the laptop, we believe we ought to design EV sounds around the unprecedented capabilities of processors in vehicles. There will be a lot more to report on that project next year!

CM: You're based in San Francisco, a center for technological innovation and development. While the tech industry has a long history here, I feel like we've arrived at a peak where many companies and workers have relocated to San Francisco, dramatically and quickly transforming the city into Silicon Valley. At the same time, you're in Silicon Valley, doing your PhD research work in Computer-Based Music Theory and Acoustics at Stanford's CCRMA. You're surrounded by the industry both at home and at school. Does this influence your process or themes in your music, and if yes, how so?

Well, technically I work between the music department (Braun) and CCRMA, so I am firmly planted in between those worlds :) I think CCRMA has a healthy relationship to industry without being beholden to it. Certainly San Francisco is very tech-centric. This is one of the most interesting things about this part of the world—for all of its positive and negative impacts. I think it gives me a realistic idea of what "tech" means in this country, which is to say that it is an incredibly large and diverse field. This has had a huge impact on my work. I wasn't really using computers to make art before I moved to the Bay Area, and now it is my practice. I regularly collaborate with technologists and a lot of my work is about mediated experience. Living in the Bay, being an artist, I am also privy to very heated conversations about the impact of big tech on the city: families are moving out at a rapid speed, there is cronyism in politics ("what's good for tech is good for SF"), and there is a mistrust between artists and the tech industry. That being said, I relate more to the "hacker" ethos that has such a history in this area: autonomy, access to information, innovation, pragmatism, etc. There is a huge population of people that share these ideas in the Bay Area, which is contagious and exciting.

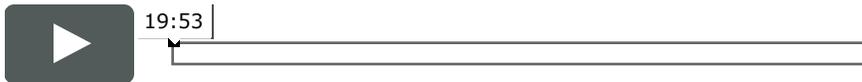
CM: For your collaboration with Mat Dryhurst and novelist and theorist Reza Negarestani,

the participatory performance *Collusion*, you toyed with mundane aspects of the setting in order to make the viewer more aware of the present and their environment through subtle disruptions. I've noticed this thread running throughout your work, an aesthetic that is deeply rooted in excavating the here and now. This is a topic that so many artists I speak to struggle with—how do I capture the essence of this moment, this time? Is this something that you think about? What role does technology play, if any?



**Holly Herndon, Reza Negarestani & Mat
Dryhurst live @Activating the Medium, San
Francisco**

from **Mat Dryhurst**



HH: I focus heavily on performance, even though I also enjoy the recording process. Performance is all about the here and now.

I think it might also have to do with my background, which is not a traditional pathway from the conservatory. There are tons of people out there who can write better counterpoint or have better orchestration skills than I do. That's not my focus. I was a club kid and spent years playing noise shows, where often the distinguishing characteristics between projects were situational ideas and decisions.

Most of my music begins with a concept or idea that I am trying to communicate, even if the execution is abstract. I'm responding to the world around me and trying to use the best tools possible to do so. Technology is an enabler of ideas; it's anything you want it to be. I'm not a tech-for-tech's sake person, i.e. I work on processes or instruments to serve an idea rather than for the pure joy of design. If I am working in an older medium I still need for it to make sense to me as an artist working in 2014. I was commissioned to write a piece for acoustic Brass Ensemble this summer. In order to make it make sense to my practice, I wrote for Brass Ensemble and their documentation crew, exploring the fact that the URL audience is at least as important as the IRL audience in this day and age, and creating an extra score dedicated to acknowledging the online audience. I am always

trying to tease out ideas to keep my work interesting, if only for myself!

One thing that I am beginning to focus on more and more is creating new options, new fantasies. We are in an odd situation where music classified as experimental has a larger platform than I have ever seen, and yet music itself seems to be as politically and culturally inconsequential as I have ever known it to be. There are many reasons for this, however I think one major culprit is that our current modes of expressing emotion, eroticism, intelligence, contemplation, etc. are so quantified and stale—we seem to be happy to find new and shiny ways to communicate the same things. I'm interested in creating new options, and new fantasies, for music—which again speaks to an awareness of the "here and now." What roles can music now play that we could not have previously imagined? This discussion appears to be more advanced in visual arts, computer science, and design, and I feel like music is long overdue a reevaluation in that respect.

Tags: [electronic music](#) [Holly Herndon](#) [Mat Dryhurst](#) [Max/MSP](#) [performance](#)
