With Desarting #2 we are faced with the creative practices of Tom Verbruggen and Gijs Gieskes. They exhibit work that can be understood and criticized both from a visual and an auditory perspective. As we will see, both creative entrepreneurs cannot decisively be reduced to the predicate artist or designer. What is, within the framework of the creative practice of Verbruggen and of Gieskes, design and what is art?
Introduction artist and designer

Tom Verbruggen (1978) lives and works in Eindhoven. He studied visual arts at the Academie voor Kunst en Vormgeving St. Joost in Breda. As most talented student of his year, he received the St. Lucaspenning; after which he received his Masters degree in Breda. Verbruggen incorporated his interest for electronic music and sound in the design of so-called crackle canvasses. A variation on the kraakdoos or crackle box – initially developed by the Dutch STEIM studio – Verbruggen placed speakers under the surface of the canvasses. These neatly designed crackle boxes seem to develop into autonomous design objects. Besides these kraakdozen, Verbruggen focuses on the technique known as circuit bending.

Gijs Gieskes (1977) lives and works in Geldrop. He graduated from the Design Academy Eindhoven where his final project involved a machine that records sound on perspex: the perspex-record can be played back on a record player. With this project he won the Willie Wortel Prijs for most innovative student. An important aspect of Gieskes' work is circuit bending – a practice where old, mostly second-hand electronic equipment is taken apart and rewired in order to wring from it new visual and particularly audio (sound/noise) potential. Moreover, Gieskes’ interest in sound and electronics translated itself too in a visual practice of crackle boxes. Examples of this can be found at www.gieskes.nl.

This short introduction makes it fairly clear that there are plenty of similarities and lots of overlap as far as the ‘artist’ and the ‘designer’ are concerned – in both their conceptual strategies and methods employed. Both the artist-turned-designer and the designer-turned-artist have received honours for their work during the graduation phase of their studies. Verbruggen studied visual and autonomous art, and is currently making neatly designed kraakdozen. Meanwhile, Gieskes studied design and is now producing autonomous (art) objects. Both artists’ work is rooted in noise. We will look at how art and design in the practices of these two creative entrepreneurs meet and interact and ultimately what the results are, which we will simply call Desarting #2. The relation between art and design in Verbruggen’s and Gieskes’ work individually as well as collectively, shall be approached from a sound art or noise perspective. I do this by observing their individual practices – the practices I found in their ateliers, and assessing the pragmatic results at the heart of Desarting #2.

1. The STEIM studio for electro-instrumental music, see http://www.steim.org/steim/
Sound art

Alan Licht defines sound art by using three criteria (p. 16). Sound art can be primarily understood as an installed sound environment defined by (acoustic) space rather than by time. In addition, this sound environment can be exhibited as a visual artwork would be. Secondly, Licht defines sound art as a visual artwork that also has a sound-producing function, such as a sound sculpture. And thirdly, as sound by visual artists that serves as an extension of the artist’s particular aesthetic, generally expressed in other media.

As can be seen in Desarting #2, both Verbruggen and Gieskes’ work can be defined as sound art. Both make and exhibit objects that produce sound. Once put in functioning, the objects create an interactive sound environment that can also be exhibited as visual artworks that are thus defined by the acoustics of the Onomatopée exhibition space itself. Moreover, within the framework of Desarting #2, both Verbruggen and Gieskes performed with circuit bent electronics.

From a theoretical point of view, both Verbruggen and Gieskes can be defined as sound artists. Sound art, in Alan Licht’s definition, is fairly broadly defined but luckily both of our artists work within one and the same sound phenomenon – noise.

Noise

The origins of the concept of noise can be found in, among other things, the work of Italian futurist Luigi Russolo (1885-1947). Long before John Cage (1912-1992) observed that all sounds are music, Russolo, in his famous ‘Art of Noises’ manifesto (1913), declared: “We have had enough (of Beethoven et al.), and we delight much more in... the noise of trams, of automobile engines, of carriages, and brawling crowds.” (Licht, 77). Russolo claimed that contemporary music was too limited in its variety of timbres: “we must break out of this limited circle of sounds and conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds.” If only Russolo could have witnessed what would eventually happen – less than one hundred years later, noise has grown into a subculture with a DIY ethic, but who is who? – has a high DIY factor. A good example of the DIY ethics of sound artists who exemplify the aforementioned subculture is the German record company Drone Records. DIY is short for ‘do it yourself’. Subcultures that advocate this ethic, are often explicitly critical of the modern, contemporary consumer society – consumerism emphasises that the solution to our needs lies in the buying of goods. DIY, on the contrary, stimulates people “to take technologies into their own hands to solve needs.” As we shall soon see, circuit bending illustrates this in a very literal way.

DIY Circuit bending, which, in this exhibition, involves both artist and designer – but who is who? – has a high DIY factor. A good example of the DIY ethics of sound artists who exemplify the aforementioned subculture is the German record company Drone Records. DIY is short for ‘do it yourself’. Subcultures that advocate this ethic, are often explicitly critical of the modern, contemporary consumer society – consumerism emphasises that the solution to our needs lies in the buying of goods. DIY, on the contrary, stimulates people “to take technologies into their own hands to solve needs.” As we shall soon see, circuit bending illustrates this in a very literal way.

DIY culture began with the punk movement of the 1970s. Instead of traditional means of bands reaching their audiences through large music labels, bands began recording themselves, distributing their own albums and make their own merchandise. Punk bands booked their own tours, creating opportunities for smaller bands to reach a larger audience. Burgeoning magazines (so-called zines) ensured for publicity of the underground punk scenes. These zines formed the entrance into DIY culture for many groups of young people – the zines showed you how to make your own tee shirts, posters, zines, books, food, etc.²

Drone Records is a good example of DIY within the noise scene. It is a vinyl-only record company with an idealistic, non-commercial stance and philosophy, and was influenced by the 1980s independent cassette tape culture. As we shall see, both Verbruggen and Gieskes work with very similar ideas.


Noise as unwanted by-product <> noise as a goal

Noise literally means sound, racket or tones, and can at first sight be experienced as a by-product of the city or of machines, in short, as a by-product of mechanical or industrial activity. Noise artists literally elevate the noise out and above the aforementioned by-product connotation of racket and value this noise as something positive. Russolo thus viewed noise as something pleasant: “We want to give pitches to these diverse noises, regulating them harmonically and rhythmically.” (Licht, 77-78). By dressing noise up as something conceptual, Russolo manages to domesticate sounds that most people instinctively consider unimportant, unnecessary or even disturbing.

Just as sound art includes a broad range of creative expressions, noise encompasses a broad palette for sound artists to utilise. Thus, Brian Eno’s soundscapes are very different from the works of noise artists like Merzbow and Whitehouse. Noise as a sound experience can thus be racket, tumult, but also unintentional sound. Some noise artists, like Verbruggen and Gieskes, experiment with things like ‘kraakdozen’ and circuit bending to produce similar kinds of noise as elicited or as squeezed from bent circuits. Noise – bleeps, crackles, loops and hums, etc. – is considered by many sound artists as a goal in itself.

2. http://www.dronerecords.de/
Visiting Gieskes' atelier
A visit to Gieskes' studio is an enjoyable and nostalgic experience. Amongst the wooden racks we find old Gameboys, an old Transformer, a circuit-bent Furby that a student made during one of Gieskes' workshops as well as the typical drawers or boxes in which Gieskes builds his bent machines. There is a basket full of old Walkmans— including some My First Sony's —old Sega Mega Drives, bent synthesizers, sequencers, a container full of Mega Drive games, Gameboys made out of brick...

It's nostalgic because I'm the same age as Gieskes and thus this stuff I see lying around his work space are the same toys and sound equipment I grew up with. It is enjoyable because the creative chaos in which Gieskes works, creates interesting results. I was also fascinated by electronic equipment, but Gieskes makes interventions within the devices, ultimately making something new— objects as sound and image generators that do things that they were not originally designed to do. Old equipment is rewired so that new possibilities arise. Or the equipment is simply tested to the max by forcing glitches on an old Sega computer, for instance.

Noise in practice: circuit bending
What Gieskes does is called circuit bending. Circuit bending is the creative short circuitsing of guitar pedals, toys, and small synthesizers to create new musical instruments and sound generators. The technique is often associated with noise music, but a lot of 'conventional' artists too, like Peter Gabriel and Tom Waits, have experimented with bent instruments. The process involves experimentation with second-hand, low-voltage electronic equipment that is often not associated with the production of music. Aesthetic value, immediate usability, and accidental results are some of the factors involved in successful circuit bending. Circuit bending is often typified by unscientific approaches to the workings of equipment.

Circuit bending methods
The technique involves the dismantling of consumer electronic appliances followed by attaching a wire to two circuit locations, so that electricity is sent from one part of the circuit to another part. Sonic results are monitored via the external speaker of the equipment or by connecting an amplifier to the speaker output. When an interesting effect is stumbled upon, it is then immediately marked 'for future reference.' Other components such as knobs and push buttons are often added to be able to turn the new obtained effect on and off. All of this is repeated on a trial and error basis.

Sometimes the process of creating a new instrument, Gieskes emphasises, is more interesting than the actual use of it, because, in the creation process, you end up spending a lot of time with the instrument and come to understand it inside and out, while you might only end up actually playing the instrument once. Besides the rewiring of an appliance, Gieskes also (re)programs computer chips. He reconfigures Sega Mega Drive games, enabling him to radically alter the images. The typical rings in Sonic the Hedghog might spell out his own name, for instance. Meanwhile Sonic’s main character may suddenly grow breasts and be seen wearing red high heels; in the background we can see flowers in the shape of Gameboys.

The functionality of a successful bent apparatus is closely connected to the time factor – some of the devices that Gieskes has altered might last for years, while others give up the ghost much more readily.

Gieskes’ atelier betrays a fascination for retro electronics and an experimental modus operandi, which involves working simultaneously on various projects employing the trial and error method. This method of working is quite labour-intensive because it involves a lot of time spent investigating and getting a feel for the device. An interesting aspect of circuit bending is the commitment to DIY. You can find short films on how to bend circuits on YouTube (www.youtube.com). Besides how-to films, YouTube is also a place where circuit benders show off their creations. Gieskes’ own Website includes some instructional films as well as some examples of his work. The idea then is to encourage people to start circuit bending themselves. The work process is not just repeatable in theory, but is explicitly presented as such: because there is so much bendable equipment readily available, the results will differ enormously per circuit bender. In other words, what I can, you can do too – maybe even better.

The equipment and appliances are easily found at Websites like Marktplaats (www.marktplaats.nl) and eBay (www.ebay.com) and, of course, at flea markets. We now take a look at Verbruggen’s atelier.

**Visiting Verbruggen’s atelier**

Verbruggen’s workspace too is filled with workbenches, tools, old electronic devices and pried open keyboards and synthesisers. Verbruggen is also occupied with circuit bending, but for Desarting #2 he produced a series of so-called crackle canvasses, loosely based on the kraakdozen developed at STEIM.³

**Applied noise: kraakdozen**

A kraakdoos is the general word for an analog electronic musical instrument that is played by directly touching predetermined points in the circuit thereby creating connections in the circuits themselves, using the human skin’s resistance properties.⁴ The skin, and by extension the body itself, are used as electronic components. It is foremost the skin’s resistance that plays a role here. The body as (radio) antenna also plays a part, primarily in the creation of oscillations in certain links brought about by touching various contact points.

The concept of the kraakdoos was developed by Michel Waisvisz and Geert Hamelberg in the 1960s, and was further developed in the 1970s, when Waisvisz joined STEIM. The kraakdoos is a simple device that is based on a single operational amplifier (one of the earliest models developed) and a few transistors, and can be easily constructed by anyone with some knowledge of basic electronics. Instructions can be found at: www.eam.se/kraakdoos/.

**Working method**

Just like Gieskes, Verbruggen makes objects with a sound-producing function – old devices and neatly designed canvasses are transformed into new instruments. For Verbruggen, the charm of this way of working is the personal element in it. A visit to Verbruggen’s atelier, like Gieskes, creates a feeling of craftsmanship and toil. There is a lot of work involved, Verbruggen admits, because if you run into problems, you end up looking for a practical solution and that can sometimes take quite some time. Verbruggen’s work ethic strongly resembles Gieskes. Like Gieskes, Verbruggen too includes a new housing for his bent electronic devices. This is a conscious choice because some benders choose to keep the original housing.

When it comes to the level of complexity of the bent device, or the crackling canvasses, you can make it as complex as you want, Verbruggen points out. In principle, you should be able to build an old Moog synthesiser based on instruction diagrams and instructional films. This is, of course, very labour intensive. Thus, Verbruggen usually opts for building simpler devices. Regardless, his work remains very labour intensive: the soldering of wires can sometimes take entire days. Compared to the price of the materials used, however, you come off relatively cheap.

**NOISE AND DECONSTRUCTION**

**Deconstruction in theory**

Deconstruction is a theory that involves interpreting texts in light of the implicit assumptions and omissions that reveal themselves within a text. For example, one of the implicit notions regarding music is that noise and racket is the very opposite of what most people understand as ‘music.’

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³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kraakdoos

A deconstructive reading, however, unravels a structure and brings implicit assumptions to light, and actually reveals what is not being told. Our thinking is often based around ideas that are based on binary opposites – the popular variant of the idea music is centred around the assumption that noise is really just noise or racket, an unwanted by-product, disharmonious and dissonant by nature. This negative definition gives noise (sound, racket) a negative connotation. In short, music is defined positively by the grace of an implicit negative connotation of racket. The term music is central and noise is the parasitic derivative of this axis (once again, within a simple definition of the concept of ‘music’).

The practice of noise artists and circuit benders like Gieskes and Verbruggen on the contrary emphasises a ‘reading’ of the concept of music whereby its parasitic brother, noise, is foregrounded. By pulling this term, from a sound art practice, out of the conceptual quagmire – noise as a negative connotation lies right under the surface of popular notions of music, harmony, sound, etc. – an enrichment of the concept of music takes place, as well as a re-evaluation of the oft-negative concept of noise.

**Deconstruction in the practices of Gieskes and Verbruggen**

The process of deconstructing music that Gieskes and Verbruggen are bringing about, is a deconstruction of the binary poles between music and noise. Where music is often defined in terms of sound and as explicitly opposed to silence and noise, Gieskes and Verbruggen conversely emphasise and celebrate noise as produced by their bent circuits and designed canvasses. This deconstruction takes place within a practice defined by DIY ethic, which can, in turn, be seen as a deconstruction of the ideas surrounding consumerism and self-activity. Interestingly, this practice is quite similar to what happens with the deconstructive reading of a text – the electronics is turned entirely upside down. While a deconstructively read text is conceptually blown apart, here old game computers, Gameboys and synthesisers are laid down on the operating table, to bring something implicit to the foreground – noise. The noise is namely hidden and buried as a mere chance occurrence in the wiring of the device itself. However, it calls for a conceptual approach like the ones employed by both Gieskes and Verbruggen, which allows the crackling sounds, the hums, the bleeps, etc. to be squeezed and elicited from their circuits.

**RELATIONSHIP ART & DESIGN**

**In the work of Gieskes and Verbruggen separately**

For Desarting #2, Verbruggen has silk-screened his crackle canvasses for the first time. Verbruggen has printed a layout on the paintings, which maps out what each button and switch operates. This makes the paintings more accessible to other users. This approach, Verbruggen feels, makes his work more commercial, accessible, utilisable, and reproducible, terms which, for him, belong more to the world of design than to the world of art.

Indeed, the design and layout allow Verbruggen’s autonomous objects to become objects that most people will more quickly associate with design than with art. The actual objects become less autonomous because of this specific form Verbruggen has chosen to give his artworks. The exhibitionary practice of the Desarting #2 shall ideally reveal just how viewers and critics experience this tension. The dividing lines between art and design are for Desarting #2 of such nature, that the viewer’s active participation is demanded in the very formulation of the relationship between the two fields.

Gieskes exhibits a number of objects including his ‘PCB puppet’, which ‘dances’ with LED lights to music composed by Gieskes on a Gameboy. Other work on display is a sequencer 05 with several plug-ins, which allows one to plug in other bent devices to create even more noise. Gieskes also displays his bent Casio keyboard, which can be connected to a screen, where audio signals are translated into images. Furthermore, he presents a circuit-bent Sega Mega Drive 2 and another bent Casio keyboard in the exhibition.

Gieskes work – I recollect that Gieskes studied design – reminds you more of autonomous art objects than of ‘design’. The design is typical DIY: pried-open consumer appliances are rewired and repackaged in wooden drawers or crates. Just like the readily available devices he uses, Gieskes prefers to use materials that are close at hand. Where most people associate design with neatly designed exteriors, Gieskes conversely uses materials that stress the objects’ reproducibility. However, this is an illusion because the objects are actually not readily reproducible at all. Instructions of how to build these objects can be found on his Website, but only a few people with specific knowledge will actually be able to reproduce these objects with any success. Gieskes has indicated that he is very interested in seeing any objects that have been inspired by the schematic drawings of his work found on his Website. This is just another example of Gieskes’ DIY work ethic.
Deserting # 2: Ethics and aesthetics through the crackle of noise

Silkscreened crackle canvas, Tom Verbruggen, 2008
Deserting #2

Ethics and aesthetics through the cracks of noise

Gijs Gieskes, 2006

Casio-sk-1

Gijs Gieskes, 2006
Sega megadrive, Gijs Gieskes, 2006
CONCLUSION
relation art and design in the work of Gieskes and Verbruggen with respect
to each other
This edition of Desarting focuses successfully on the boundaries and dividing
lines that are implicit for many visitors when it comes to the differences be-
tween 'art' and 'design'. This focus occurs in the practice of both of the creative
entrepreneurs which so emphatically calls into question the dividing line be-
tween these two fields. By combining the work of a design-educated creative
entrepreneur (Gieskes) with the work of an art-educated creative entrepreneur
(Verbruggen) we have managed to upset a number of applecarts while simul-
taneously finding some vital connections between the two. Thus many exhibi-
tion visitors will wonder about the relation between the two spheres of action:
when is something called art (what is art?) and when is it design? What is
particularly interesting, is that neither artist is unequivocally one or the other:
Verbruggen is not a ‘typical’ artist who only makes art objects, and similarly,
Gieskes is not just a designer.

On the contrary, it was already obvious from the work they produced while
still in school as well as their various related activities that they are not easily
pigeonholed by simple notions of design and art. Verbruggen performs as a
sound artist and as a conceptual/experimental artist while Gieskes offers work-
shops in circuit bending, composes 8-bit music and performs with his Game-
boys and related visuals. This kind of position-finding naturally influences the
relationships we find in their work separately, as well as when we position
their works in relation to one another for Desarting #2.

Like Verbruggen, I incline to turn roles upside down – maybe Verbruggen is
really the 'designer' here and Gieskes the 'artist'. Actually, this kind of definition
does not serve either of the artists very well. Both of their work is ultimately
oriented towards the transgression of art definitions and boundaries. The
practices of both artists show us the surprising possibilities of a perspicuously
conceptual vision on the sound artly theme of noise. Aesthetics and ethics form
a synergy through the sound art perspective that is noise. This attitude, more-
ever, determines the design of the exhibited objects and stimulates, by work-
shops and instruction manuals, to implement this method yourself – which in
turn encourages the DIY mentality. By confronting the tension between the
presuppositions surrounding art and design and shattering them, both artists
succeed in producing the kind of noise that will keep critics awake at night
wondering how to read them?