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Jean-Pierre Gauthier, *Orchestre à géométrie variable*, Galerie B-312, Montréal, September 5 – October 4, 2014

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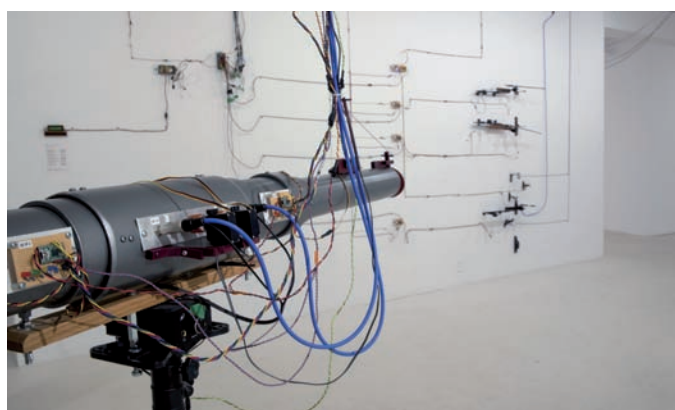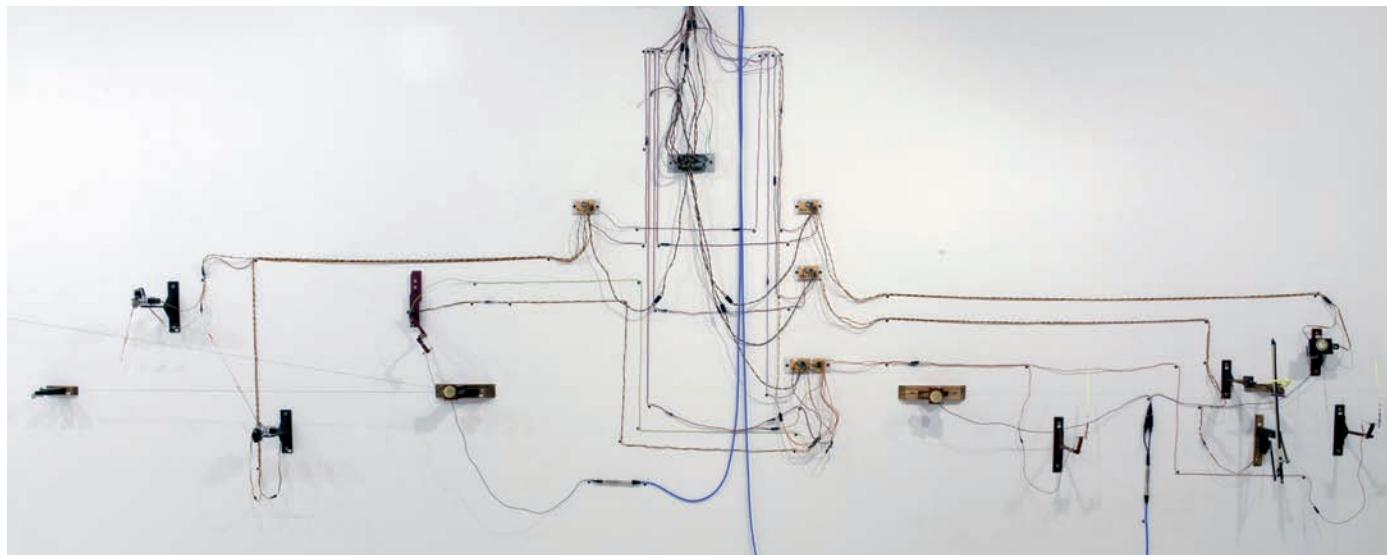
Jean-Pierre Gauthier, installation views, *Orchestre à géométrie variable*,
Galerie B-312, Montréal, 2014.
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Jean-Pierre Gauthier,
Orchestre à géométrie variable

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Jean-Pierre Gauthier asserts that his works are not machines, but systems. For him, the distinction is both pragmatic and conceptual: machines are singular and self-contained; systems are open-ended, permitting complex implementations and interpretations. Shifting the focus somewhat, consider just a few of the elaborate technological systems that texture our daily lives: Google and Facebook use complex software systems to construct pictures of our personalities from our online habits, predict our interests, then feed them back to us via ads and search suggestions. Familiar as to be banal, operating invisibly; we rarely give this (or any technology) much serious thought. Yet it shouldn't take a whistleblower or conspiracy theorist (should it?) to point out that these systems shape our behaviours as much as read them, in a serpent-devouring-its-tail commodity logic wherein we become part of the algorithm. Artist-made systems disrupt this with an alternative logic, one that can be absurd or lyrical, contemplative or critical. *Orchestre à géométrie variable,* at Montréal's Galerie B-312 this past autumn, was such a system.

Occupying the gallery were six sound murals, each a painstakingly arranged ensemble of circuitry, mechanisms and musical hardware in which robotic devices actuated bows, strings, cymbals and wood-blocks. Captured by contact microphones, their amplified sounds emanated from speakers inside a row of telescope-like structures; volume modulated by automated louvers at each tube end. Linking these elements, *Orchestre* consisted of a myriad of methodically placed, interconnected signal lines,

becoming a wall drawing depicting the scheme of the network they formed. Centralized micro-controllers "conducted" the "performers" over the network, through a sixty-eight minute cycle of nineteen compositions (eleven composed *in situ* at B-312), reminiscent of musical genres from rock to experimental.

Orchestre à géométrie variable is a masterwork of a virtuoso. The craft is superlative; programming and composition are integrated seamlessly and elegantly. Gauthier's recent work has seen a shift from aleatory to composed, chaotic to orderly. Lately, he seems fixated on *control* of his systems and he achieves this quite successfully here: the *Orchestre* is reliable, repeatable and rugged. But there is a trade-off... one can't help but wonder if there is too much that is being controlled; one misses the messy spontaneity and nervous fragility of earlier works such as *Effondrements* or *Marqueurs d'incertitude*, compelling exactly because their systems were less controlled—ending up in unpredictable states.

Nonetheless, the electronic ones and zeros traversing Gauthier's orchestral control system are a microcosmic, albeit simplified, mirror of the digital networks that permeate our quotidian environment. Yet, stubbornly and staunchly, Gauthier retains physicality in his work; its sounds are embodied and must be actually experienced, not simply downloaded and consumed. In this way, at least on some level, for a temporary period of time, we can pull the snake's tail out of its mouth.
[Peter Flemming]