

# Ken Butler - Untitled

The path to the creation of my first hybrid instrument and ultimately performance work was begun while working with contact printing full torso x-rays of people with scoliosis onto light-sensitive diazo paper used by architects. The resulting images were extremely guitar-like (vertebrae as frets and neck, etc.) and were used as a backdrop for a large wall installation utilizing an actual guitar and violin. Entitled "Harmony on the Critical List", the work had a musical/medical theme as well as dada-futuro-cubist qualities. As I was already musically involved with string instruments, I then began to think of the ergonomic and proportional relationship they bear to the human body as objects.

A year or so later in 1978 I was in my basement looking for something when I saw a small hatchet that had been left by a former tenant. Something compelled me to pull it up under my chin as though it were a violin. Immediately I imagined it as a fully functional instrument and went upstairs to see if it would fit into a violin case which it did absolutely perfectly. I fitted a fingerboard, tailpiece, pegs, bridge, and contact microphone to the axe and was quite amazed and thrilled when I discovered it sounded remarkably good through my guitar amp. So I could really play my "axe". I was unaware at the time of the profound effect of this creation on my artistic live performances and was both my first sound piece as well as sculptural object and further created the fusion of art forms I was seeking - a transformative bricolage or hybridization of form and function and cultural object identity. It was first exhibited in an exhibition along with my paintings, collage-drawings, photographs, and an inter-active kinetic sculpture/light projection installation. It was three years later in 1981 that I first played my instruments in a multi-media performance along with slide projections and three other performer/musicians. The fantastic and unexpected response to this performance pointed me in the direction of live performance work.

Since that time I have created over 150 hybrid string (and percussion) instrument/sculptures from primarily found objects and materials, installed numerous inter-active sound and light installations, and staged live performances ranging from solo concerts to large-scale multi-media events with text, instrument-controlled multiple slide and kinetic shadow projections and live music played on my hybrid instruments by up to a dozen musicians. I have also continued to produce flatwork, sometimes using slides of these images in performances.

One of the underlying themes of my work is hyper-utility; the desire for objects and images to work together in many permutations. The hybrids function as both unique playable musical instruments and assemblage sculpture; most of them cradle lovingly in your embrace as you play them; they are constructed mostly from readily available objects made to perform a completely different function; they are modular elements in installations and subjects for slides and photos; they are built to human scale and even the largest pieces are designed to be easily transported and set up - much effort has been spent on functional modular systems design to simplify as much as possible the inherent logistical problems of performing regularly with over a dozen instruments at a time. Not to mention all the other audio-visual hardware required.

Contemporary urban living is a bewildering collage of multiple images, ideas, and objects in a constant state of flux as information overload becomes the touchstone of our age. The promise of time-saving is a mixed blessing as myriads of options create more decision-making and the often obsessive accumulation of objects creates storage and organizational problems. Objects people own should sing for their supper or be discarded.

As we move from the mechanical to the electronic as we approach the fin-de-siecle, our cultures chew up and spit out ideas and objects with reassigned priorities. The resulting detritus is a living corpse - a random and chaotic churning body of juxtaposed and deconstructed items and associations. It is from this storehouse of man-made objects, sports equipment, tools, and human-scale hardware (in the spirit of Dada, Futurist, and American "ingenuity") that I further dismantle and reassemble the consumer society into functional assemblages in the form of musical and religious icon symbolically linked to much of the psychic and social upheaval in our culture; it dominates modern music; it is as well a potent androgynous image of the female form, male phallus, and hand held weapon.

This process of transformation and re-animation creates an ironic twisting of the object identity as hidden meanings and associations created a new culture of hybridization; a multi-disciplinary world of re-invention

and hyper-utility; a bricolage of image, sound, and cybernetics; a formula for a post-apocalyptic reconstruction.