



# The Sound And the Future

*Playing it safe is too risky.*

– Underground Resistance, “Transition”

From a present in the shadows, the future can be difficult to see. Without sight, however, other senses sharpen. Some come to hear the future with striking crispness. Lightlessness characterized 1980s Detroit, whose working poor found themselves freefalling after their jobs were automated. Holes in the social safety net left many to hit bottom. The rhythmic thud of their impact was heard by those working resistively underground, and it became the beat of a soundtrack for a reimagined future.

Among the early innovators of this music that came to be known as techno is the Detroit collective Underground Resistance (UR), founded in the late '80s by Jeff Mills and Mike Banks, and later joined by Robert Hood. Building on the work of the “Belleville Three” (Juan Atkins, Kevin Saunderson, and Derrick May), UR infused its music with a political agenda that sought to reclaim the future for those with the least power in the present. They clamored for an egalitarian ethic and the death of capitalist celebrity – performing in facemasks, without a front man – and asserted control over technology, sampling and remixing the disembodied robotic sounds of their city’s economic demise. In the tight spaces of nightclubs, sound regained body through dance, and movement became mind through trance. The synchronized stomping and shuffling of feet marched into the future. This pleasure militia tunneled under the Atlantic and resurfaced in Berlin in the early '90s when the future was again up for grabs. There it combined creative forces with like-minded artists to turn techno into the global medium we know today.

Robots too have spread rapidly in recent years, from localized industrial applications to a mutable global platform open to interference and experimentation by even the most casual roboticist. Designers also have the opportunity to appropriate the technology of their day for subversive ends, just as the pioneers of techno music did in the 1980s. Though the first wave

ALEX SCHWEDER, *THE SOUND AND THE FUTURE*, 2016. INFLATABLE PERFORMANCE SCULPTURE, METALLIC VINYL AND FAUX FUR, 15' × 15' × 15'. PHOTOS: ALEX SCHWEDER. COURTESY WASSERMAN PROJECTS.

of automotive robots bears some of the blame for Detroit's troubled recent history, but if approached in the same spirit that drove the birth of techno, robotics might participate in the city's resurgence. To probe what this could mean for Detroit today, I returned to the tight interior of a dance floor, where spatial experimentation is immediate. I sited *The Sound and the Future*, an architectural robot that continually reconfigures the interior by flopping around on the dance floor's open field. Its six identically shaped silver and fur-covered arms inflate and collapse, producing dynamic chambers and relationships with its surroundings. Somewhere between the frenetic beat of techno and the glacial grind of a building, *The Sound and the Future* moves butohlike to the beat of Mills's track "The Bells" slowed to a 10th of its speed and to the recorded sounds of its own fans switching on and off sped up to something danceable. *The Sound and the Future* proposes that architecture is a performance, cueing human occupants to move differently as it transforms. Shifting moment by moment, this interior space imagines a future in which buildings and the bodies that occupy them are so imbricated as to be inseparable.

ALEX SCHWEDER WORKS WITH ARCHITECTURE AND PERFORMANCE ART TO COMPLICATE THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN OCCUPYING SUBJECTS AND OCCUPIED OBJECTS.