

BED PIECE:  
Pelta Feldman Variation

a permanent installation  
by Daniel Fishkin  
at Room & Board

opening celebration:  
Friday, October 2, 2015

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# Materials

cherry and catalpa lumber, wire, piezos, Sidrazzi synthesizer, murphy bed, brass screws, mattress, sheets, blankets, pillows.

# Some Histories of *Bed Piece*

Daniel Fishkin

In 2011, I dreamed of making a circuit that would sonify the discovered plurality of a sexual encounter. The frame for this artwork was thus the bedframe itself, where many of my intimate experiences have occurred. I wanted to make a passive piece, one that would make music when I was with someone, but not require the gestures of an instrument. I didn't want to put music in the background, but rather allow it to be absorbed by the larger, more glacial pace of our everyday movements over many months. But I wasn't in a relationship at the time—it occurred to me that most of my nights were not spent having wild casual sex, but being by myself. I wanted to make a piece that would sound when with a partner, and would be silent when I was alone.

I thought about this work for a long time. As I began working on different solutions and different circuits, I thought also about different ways to share this experience with a partner or with an audience at large. Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh undertook a very intimate piece with *Art / Life: One Year Performance 1983-1984 (Rope Piece)*, in which they were tied together with an 8-foot rope for a year. As the piece continued, they used several approaches to documentation: a photograph every day, and a C60 cassette recording their daily conversations. While they shared these pictures along with the work, they sealed away the cassettes forever, never to be listened to. Should I take a picture of my bed, each morning or each night? Should I use a polaroid camera for its immediacy, or is that painfully dated in this day and age? Should I make recordings, or should these bedroom performances remain "live"? I talked about these fantasies with new partners, sharing them at first with great reluctance, as one would reveal an STD. I really believed that a relationship with me would also mean a relationship with *Bed Piece*.

CleveMed Medical Devices provided me with some samples for bed sensors (for preventing bedsores in hospital beds), but this technology was stubborn and prohibitively expensive. I also considered using an infrared camera to control software via Max/Msp and Jitter, but I wasn't happy with my software sketches at the time. And, something about having a camera over my bed felt weird. This project is about intimacy, not surveillance or voyeurism.

The solution came in the form of a synthesizer. I mentioned the project to my friend Peter Blasser, who is a synthesizer designer at his own company Ciat-Lonbarde. I want to mention the origin and context of these synth circuits. Recall the early video synthesizer designs by Nam June Paik—do ever we consider their engineer, Shuya Abe? In 2010 I worked for Todd Bailey, the engineer who designed the circuitry behind many of Cory Arcangel's works. Bailey's name is listed nowhere but the internal circuit boards and payroll invoices. I'm interested in engineers and the subtleties of their role in what I find to be very compelling, important works. I want to cite my sources, but it's more involved than that. The technology is not neutral! It bears on the work; it defines its formal qualities. The work would mean something different if achieved by different means, by a different circuit or sound. When I discussed this piece with my friend Monroe Street, he suggested a version of a *Bed Piece* that contained only sounds of laughter. Ha ha!

Most important were Peter's words: "You don't want to have your computer there while you're in bed with someone." Peter gave me two Sidrazzi synthesizer circuit boards and I built them into a bedside table made from cherry and wenge wood. Julia and I bought a bed off craigslist. 14 voltage-controlled amplifiers for triangle waves are controlled through contact microphones affixed to the wooden bed slats. This was the first time I created a tangible object that would actually allow me to perform *Bed Piece*, to hear it, to experience it. The Sidrazzi synth is not adjusted by pitch knobs or set to tempered intervals, but by buttons and brass pegs that produce an unexpected response. The sound is always evolving, even more so as you stumble

across the bed and discover different regions of sound. There is no tuning for *Bed Piece*—rather, playing it is a continuous process of tuning.

During my residency at Room & Board in 2014, I set up the structure that for me felt like an adequate rehearsal, but certainly not the piece I had imagined. It was not my room, not my home, and thus doing the piece there seemed strange—exciting, or even pleasurable, but a contradiction in my own terms. During the opening salon, I invited people upstairs in small groups—why not try it? I was appalled by a visitor who spanked his girlfriend performatively in front of a room of strangers. However, not all of these contradictions were unwelcome. While having sex on the bed produced a predictable sound, I discovered that actually the moments before and after love-making were truly interesting, each player/performer carefully adjusting their weight and listening for their sonic impressions together in time.

Back in Connecticut, where I was in graduate school for music composition, I set up *Bed Piece* again, and everything seemed ready to go. But I only turned on the circuit occasionally—I never began the yearlong commitment I had dreamed of. At first I thought, well, who knows where I'll be when June rolls around and I graduate from Wesleyan—so it was the wrong time to start the piece. But somewhere between there and falling in love with my sweetheart, Catalina Alvarez, I never actually began the piece that seemed to be so fiery and necessary back in 2011. The work would have a different meaning now that I'm no longer single. We set it up the circuit in our home in Philadelphia, but never turned on the speakers. The microphones are still listening, making voltage in response to our changes in pressure. I think about that often while we're lying there.

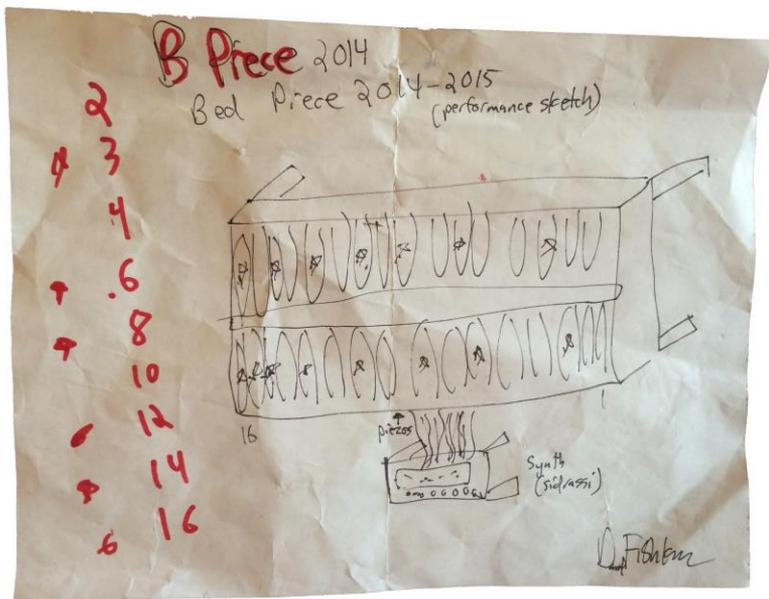
Anyway, I'm not sure I remember how it came up to reinstall this piece at Room & Board. Maybe Julia had mentioned that she hoped to have a Murphy bed for the guest room. When Julia and I first began to seriously talk about doing this piece again, we began to talk about it as a permanent work, an addition to her and Hannes's house

and the artistic project she now spearheads. This new piece, the so-called Pelta-Feldman Variation, is largely determined from serious aspects of practicality and community. It is no exaggeration to say that Julia was a major collaborator in formal terms. We spray-painted the bedframe, purchased from [murphybeds.com](http://murphybeds.com), matte gold. We picked cherry lumber to match the desk already in the room. Every aspect of the work was measured carefully in order to insure that it would not disturb the existing furniture and architecture. Our ongoing conversation about lighting continues.

Besides having the occasion to make something beautiful for someone who will care for it, I don't really know what the *Variation* means to me as a sonic object—who will play it, and when, and why? One very valuable aspect of making the piece was the occasion to think about the ideas of this piece seriously, to treat them as real considerations, while the original idea remained untested. I still believe in the piece, and I hope this object can tell a story.

We only turned on the amplifiers on Tuesday. Most of the time, as I worked on the piece, the circuit was not sounding. Without wanting to feign neutrality about my choice of sonic materials, I must confess to a fundamental ambivalence about the porous boundaries between sound and music that create the vehicle for this artwork to exist. Music here is a tool for measurement, not mere sonic content. When I give a one-liner about this piece—if someone asks me what I'm up to lately, for example—I always reduce it to "I'm building a bed synthesizer"—and I feel bad at the deception. I don't want to play the bed synthesizer; I want to hear how people sound.

Every time I undertake a major work I'm a little bemused by my dominant visual aesthetic that emerges in the form of a thousand wires. Over 200 feet of electrical wire was used to transform the bed from static object into something more. They are everywhere. They are difficult to control, and to untangle. But, I like the wires. I can't hide them. The circuits are messy. The wires are how you connect things. I want to feel connected.



Daniel Fishkin, performance sketch for *Rehearsal for Bed Piece*, 2014.

On *Bed Piece* (2011–15), *Rehearsal for  
Bed Piece* (2014), and *Bed Piece: Pelta  
Feldman Variation* (2015):  
a Bed-time Manifesto

Julia Pelta Feldman

*La poésie se fait dans un lit comme l'amour  
Ses draps défaits sont l'aurore des choses*

*Poetry is made in a bed like love  
Its rumpled sheets are the dawn of things*

— André Breton<sup>1</sup>

*Bed Piece: Pelta Feldman Variation* began as a makeshift version of itself, a little over a year ago, in the same room that it now permanently occupies. That work was not actually *Bed Piece*—it was called *Rehearsal for Bed Piece*—but neither is this; this is a new version, a further outgrowth of a project that has occupied Daniel Fishkin for years. Daniel's *Bed Piece*, as he sees it, is an as yet unrealized durational performance—not an installation, nor a sculpture, though the viewer (listener, slumberer) of its material iterations may be forgiven for mistaking it as such. It is inspired by the brevilouquent yet brilliant oeuvre of Tehching Hsieh, whose one-year performances of the late 1970s and '80s provide a transcendence of life through art the likes of which Daniel and I, each in our own way, both pursue.

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<sup>1</sup> André Breton, "Sur la route de San Romano," *Poèmes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1948.

Hsieh's performances, though they allowed for specific dates of public viewing, are not about audience; they are an individual's intensely personal struggle with the limits of what art can do, less an attempt to bridge art and life than to alchemically alter the latter by means of the former. In the course of this attempt, Hsieh locked himself in a cage, without hearing, speaking, or reading a word, for a year; punched a time clock every hour, on the hour, for a year; remained out-of-doors for a year; tied himself with an 8-foot length of rope to another performance artist, whom he would not touch, for a year; and avoided all manifestations of art and the art world for a year. All of these works required careful preparation, as well as near unimaginable endurance, but they do not thematize or fetishize endurance, as do, for example, some of Marina Abramovic's performances. They are anti-conceptual, in so far as they are not foregone conclusions; they are experiments that must be executed.

Daniel's *Bed Piece*, in its original, unrealized form, is like Hsieh's one-year performances in that it proposes just such an experiment: Daniel intends to live for one year with a bed that turns his movements upon it into music. Originally, it was meant to express the sonic difference between being alone and being with someone else. But as Daniel has said, it is less a "giant sex toy" than a fantasy to be enacted: a performance. The essential part of the experiment is therefore not the instrument itself—magnificent as it is. Nor is it only a question of making evident and measurable what is typically invisible and unquantifiable, like similar operations performed by William Anastazi, Alison Knowles, or John Cage—and it was Daniel who first introduced me to John Cage, back in high school—but rather of creating something truly new from that preexisting data. Daniel's instrument doesn't merely amplify the sounds one makes in bed; it actually translates one's movements, via pressure-sensitive transducers and analog synthesizers, into music. If considered durationally, *Bed Piece's* fundament is its proposition not only to make art from what Daniel does naturally but to weave art into the fabric of his everyday reality.

Daniel wanted to ensure that Room & Board's temporary installation of his musical bed, presented to guests last year during his salon, would not be confused with the consummation of this private, durational project, and insisted that we call that work *Rehearsal for Bed Piece*. This name both reinforces *Bed Piece's* identity as performance and indicates the provisional nature of the *Rehearsal*. These disclaimers serve to establish that *Bed Piece*, as Daniel sees it, cannot be reduced to an object.

Despite this, *Bed Piece's* latest incarnation—the *Pelta Feldman Variation* presented tonight, which in accordance with tradition is named for its patron—is profoundly material. It was conceived and built as a permanent installation—literally as a piece of furniture—of fine Pennsylvania cherry wood that Daniel painstakingly selected, wanting it to be a thing of beauty. And it is: both a thing, and beautiful. Care was given to choosing the speakers, the hardware, the placement of cables on the bed and of the bed in the room, to ensure that it would harmonize with the room's preexisting décor and provide not only a meaningful but also a comfortable experience for whomever lies in it. And yet, I would argue that the *Pelta Feldman Variation* does not at all constitute a demeaned fetishization of an immaterial project. Rather, this work materializes in a new way *Bed Piece's* original goal of weaving life and art into each other. As such, it is both symbol and instrument of that alchemy that Hsieh sought, that Daniel and I both seek.

For me, *Bed Piece: Pelta Feldman Variation* lies literally at the heart of that effort. It is where future residents will sleep when they come to Room & Board, which is what I call my apartment when it is dedicated to these intentions, and where my family will stay when they come to visit. (It is where our current resident, Gregor Weichbrodt, slept last night, and will sleep tonight when everyone goes home; he has graciously allowed himself to be kicked out for this party.) Room & Board is itself very much an experiment, in that it is haphazard and precarious, in that it seeks to eschew exactly those structures that separate what Hsieh calls "art-time" from what he calls "life-time." Many

praise the spirit of attempts to circumvent the system, but few respect such attempts until, paradoxically, they have achieved institutional sanction. (May Room & Board ever evade that sort of success.) In order to function meaningfully, all variations of *Bed Piece* must remain not only outside typical institutions of art, but also embedded within the daily rhythms of life that the physical structure of a home both shelters and represents.

*Bed Piece* has been installed permanently in a home—in my home—and in my life, but despite this apparent stability it is still very much an experiment. Like any musical instrument—for that matter, like any piece of furniture—it must be used in order for its function to take shape. In creating *Bed Piece: Pelta Feldman Variation*, Daniel provides the structure of the work, but he abdicates at the roles of composer, performer, and audience, leaving those roles to us. As an instrument, *Bed Piece: Pelta Feldman Variation* is not as simple as it might seem: Daniel designed its control panel for his own fingers, and a complex range of changes in the sound and its quality can be achieved through its knobs, buttons, and cables. He and I discussed the possibility of simplifying the controls—fixing the tuning—but decided against it. That is to say, one must learn to play the work. So far, no one has done so but Daniel. Therefore the instrument is not its own end, but a platform for further creation. Tonight does not signify this work's completion, but its inauguration.

In our attempt to join life and art, Daniel and I enlist in a long tradition, but there is a new urgency in it. For the white-collar worker, the desire to break down this boundary has been replaced by the obliteration of the distinction between public and private. There is a sense—it is argued by some—that late capitalism has achieved the fusion of art and life, in allowing us to work more than ever at jobs we are expected to subscribe to ideologically. If we love our jobs, we are told, then we never really have to work. This corporate vision of utopia has already been put into practice in the tech compounds of California. At the heart of it, of course, is the drive for productivity and the necessity of branding, ceaseless demands that

the artist, too, is expected to embrace. But successful self-marketing is not a solution to this problem; rather, it is a symptom of it. In its familial camaraderie, absence of directives and requirements (residents need not accomplish anything), and emphatic lack of professionalism, Room & Board defines itself in opposition to late capitalist productivism. When Breton wrote that “poetry is made in a bed like love,” he was not exhorting his comrades to make better, more productive use of their sleeping hours.

Sleep, as necessary as it is inevitable, is nonetheless the opposite of what we talk about when we talk about productivity. Sleep does not accomplish anything, except sleep. Sleep is not a performance. Sleep is its own end. I propose that we celebrate the quiescence of bed-time as a form of resistance to the spurious amalgam of work and life sought by latter-day productivists. And it is sleep’s power to evade such rationality—the dream—that attracted Breton and the Surrealists. Many psychologists have rejected the Freudian interpretation of dreams that so inspired Surrealism, but there are new interpretations. One recent theory, propounded by neuroscientist Rodolfo R. Llinás, suggests that rather than a deformation or side effect of consciousness, the dream is in fact its default state.<sup>2</sup> According to this theory, then, we are always dreaming, and when we are awake, the stream of our consciousness is adjusted to match the input of our senses.

Perhaps theories of dreaming can still inspire us. Daniel cannot exactly explain why he has yet to undertake his version of *Bed Piece*, the one-year performance; life has gotten in the way. But he likes knowing that his bed, kitted out with the same piezo transducers and wires that bring the *Variation* to life, is always listening to his movements, even if it is not attached to the speakers that would project them. He likes knowing that the music is there, latent. I imagine that, most of the time, *Bed Piece: Pelta Feldman Variation* will be in a similar state: potential. One of *Bed Piece*’s lessons is that we are always making music, whether we are listening or not.

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<sup>2</sup> Rodolfo R. Llinás, *I of the Vortex: From Neurons to Self*, Cambridge: M.I.T., 2001.

*I asked Peter Blasser to contribute a text as a part of the inaugural festivities of this opening party. Peter responded with the following poem, which does not directly address Bed Piece, but its precursor, Conversation Piece, which used the same circuits attached to chairs instead of a mattress. Peter sat in a gallery across from Nathan Friedman, drinking out of copper vessels, and their movements in the chairs controlled these sounds. In fact, the chairs were far too sensitive, continually responding to even the most subtle bodily movements. I worried that I would have to modify the circuit for a higher electrical impedance. In contrast, the mattress used in Bed Piece provides a direct physical impedance, absorbing and cushioning the slight motions and making a more playable instrument. The mattress, while not electrical, provided a circuit solution. I never mounted Conversation Piece again, but Peter's reflections suggest a progression in time—as I mount this piece, I do not suppress its past versions. I hope that this poem's inclusion might further blur the categories of artist/engineer and point towards an intimacy.*

— Daniel

## Untitled

Peter Blasser

Sitting with fatman  
i put down the copper cup  
thinking of my lives

*Daniel and Julia would like to thank Catalina Alvarez, Hannes Bajohr, Peter Blasser, Samuel Lang Budin, Tehching Hsieh, Linda Mai Green, Deborah Peña, and Gregor Weichbrodt.*

**R o o m & B o a r d** is an artist's residency and salon that takes place at my apartment here in Williamsburg.

Daniel Fishkin constructed *Bed Piece: Pelta Feldman Variation* during a residency in September 2015.

Director: Julia Pelta Feldman

President: Deborah Peña

[www.roomandboard.nyc](http://www.roomandboard.nyc)