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The Artist Who Turns Glass Shards and IV Drips into Instruments

by [Claire Voon](#) on July 22, 2015

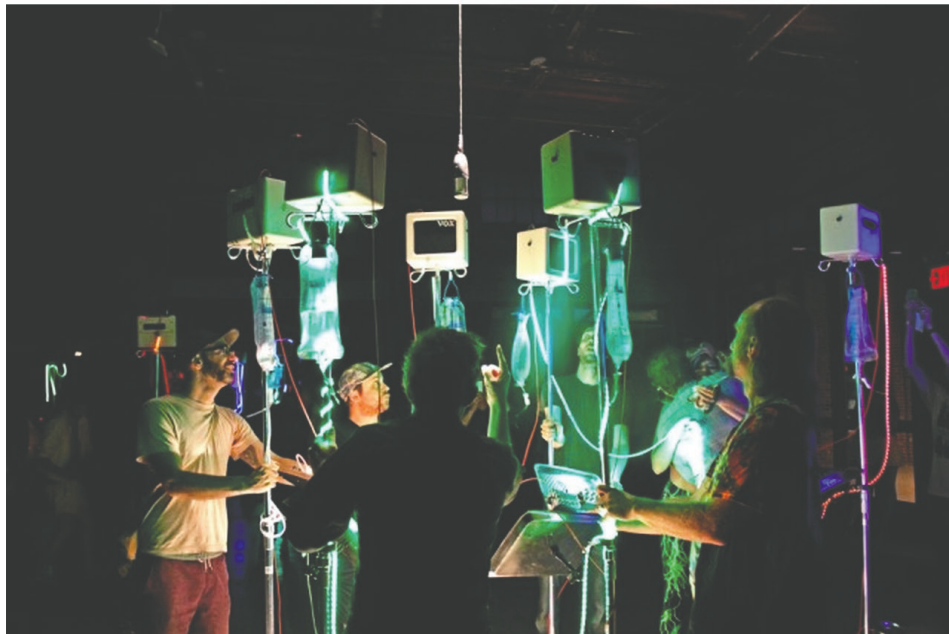
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Lucas Abela, "IV:BPM" (2015) at 'Anxious Spaces: Installation As Catalyst II' (photo by Luis Nieto Dickens, courtesy Clocktower)

For decades, [Lucas Abela](#) played turntables hooked up to all sorts of objects, from swords to meat skewers to amplified trampolines. Since 2003, however, the Australian experimental sound artist's instrument of choice has been a large shard of glass. Pressing his face against the broken pane, Abela hums and blows into it during his performances, with a contact microphone amplifying the sounds, warped by a series of effects pedals. The resulting noise resembles the high-pitched, grating yowl of a circular saw or of a high-speed drill boring into your jaw courtesy of your dentist; still, the layered screams that the mundane glassware emits are as alluring as they are jarring. This tension is what drew Abela to the material in the first place.

“The tone was so much more beautiful than any of the metal I’d been playing, and I could get so much more richer sounds from it,” he told Hyperallergic. “It’s kind of like a reverse trumpet, like a cross between a raspberry and throat singing.” Abela usually plays his glass in dark rooms or in basements, but the audience at his recent performance in Queens saw the artist shredding in broad daylight, in the center of the expansive [Knockdown Center](#).



Lucas Abela, “IV:BPM” (2015) at ‘Anxious Spaces: Installation As Catalyst II’ (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless noted otherwise)

The set was part of [Anxious Spaces: Installation as Catalyst](#), the second annual group show presented by [Clocktower](#), which closes Sunday. Featuring artists whose work “incorporates dynamic and time-based elements,” this year’s lineup also included pieces by [Molly Lowe](#), [Tim Bruniges](#), and [Prince Rama](#). Abela’s performance occurred against the backdrop of his site-specific and interactive installation, “IV:BPM” (2015), which also engages with experimental noise and, like Abela’s always-improvised shows, creates an intense experience grounded in chance and freeform. “IV:BPM” consists of 18 intravenous drips each affixed with a contact mic that records the pulse of liquid hitting an attached container; the sound is then fed through audio effects with the results blaring from a small

amplifier balanced at the very top of

each drip. Visitors are invited to play these alternative single-beat drum machines — part instrument, part sculpture — and manipulate the output by tweaking knobs and sliders so the collection of drips come together as one “participatory instrument,” as Abela called it.

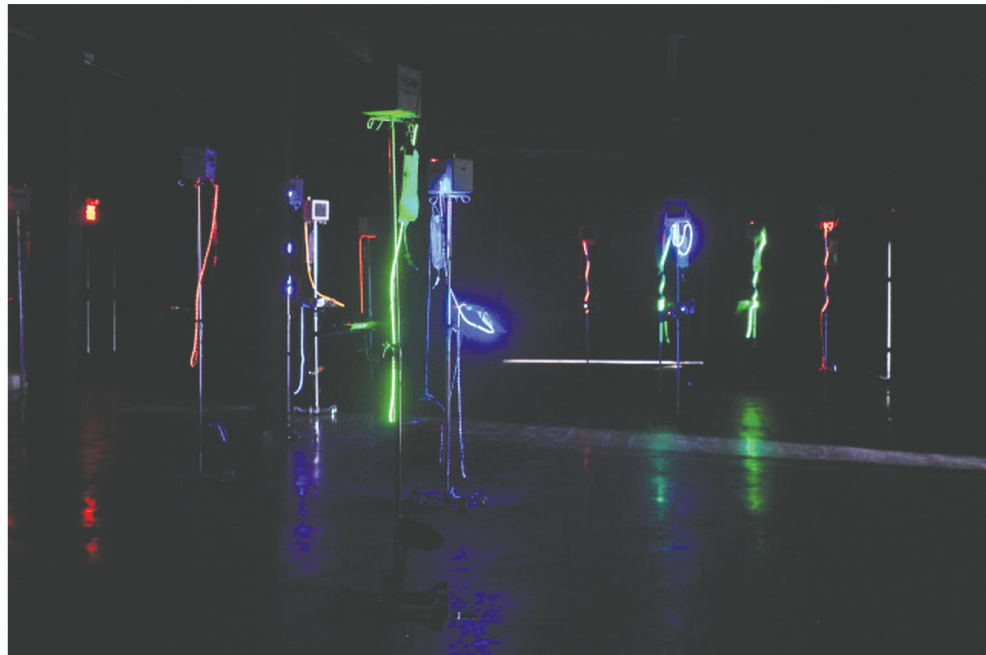
“The installation is basically a large-scale instrument that can be played by the audience,” he said. “I’ve always felt like noise music and effect pedals and all that stuff is more fun to play with than it is to watch, and so I wanted to create experiences where people would get to play with audio effects.”

Housed in one of Knockdown Center’s darkest rooms, the drips are also rigged with colorful LED strips that react to the beats, connected to a circuit that converts the audio signals into light effects. The frenzy of the raw, modulating noise is thus paired with intermittent flashes to create an experience that immerses visitors in unformalized groupings of sounds and electroluminescence. This disorder is heightened since the beats “IV:BPM” emits are completely dependent on visitors who become performers as they react to Abela’s original effects — it borrows this frame from Abela’s own shows, for which he never prepares arrangements, instead feeding off the energy of his audience.

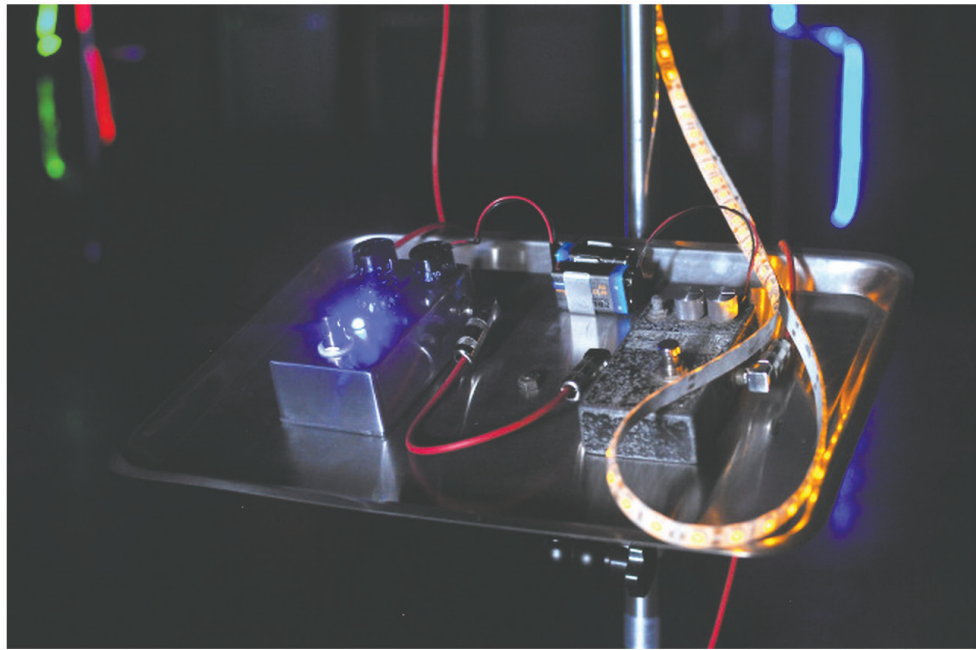
Visitors may alter the beats on an individual drip in three ways, making each one a unique and autonomous instrument in the installation's ever-changing composition: playing with the audio effects bends the sounds so the drops can produce blips or thud like a heartbeat; adjusting the IV nozzles changes the drip speed — and thus the beats per minute (BPM); and rolling the slender stands through the room shifts amplitudes within the communally created score. The vast mobility of noise is boosted by the responsive nature of each drip stand, which, though designed as a mechanized drum machine, does not actually have the stability or predictability of a metronomic beat.

"The IV drips are slightly off, like a human drummer," Abela said. "They also have the environmental elements; like the sway of the bag would make the drips hit the drum elements at different places, which would change the timbre of each beat as well, each and every beat that was played." The "drum elements" are various types of containers affixed to each stand that collect the drops, from paint cans and metal trays to a dog bowl and even a child's wooden paddle. The impact of water against each object thus creates distinct sounds so each IV stand exists as a different instrument; the variations are subtle, calling for close listening. That's a challenge, as the result can be sonically schizophrenic and often harsh, but part of the pleasure of the seemingly mechanized is that it holds unexpected, organic tones and textures.

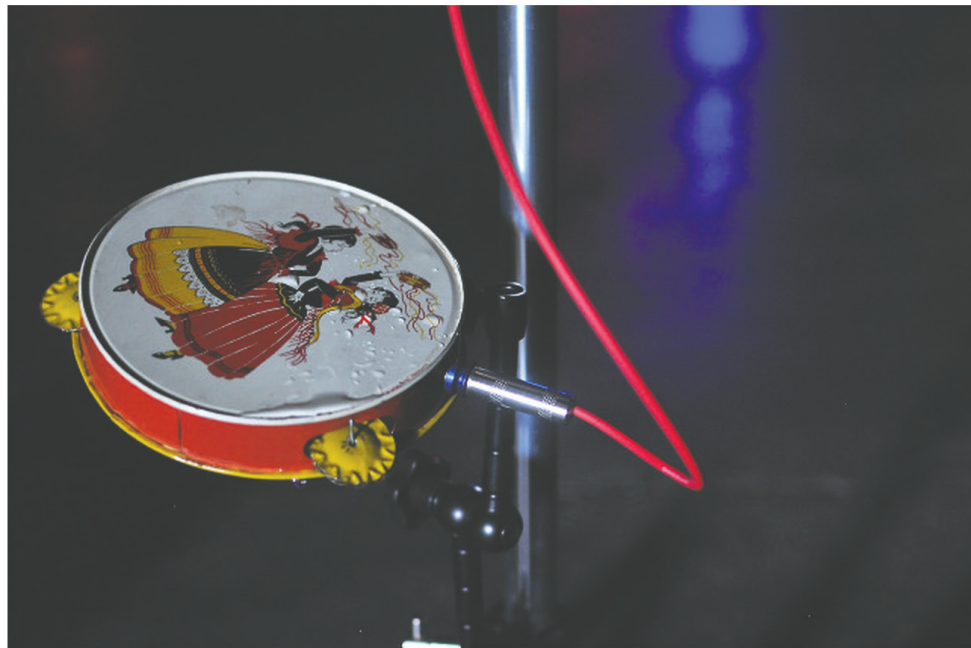
"I think there are intricate details you can find in layers and layers and layers of noise," Abela said. "It can be just as soothing as a symphony to the ear."



Lucas Abela, "IV:BPM" (2015) at 'Anxious Spaces: Installation As Catalyst II'



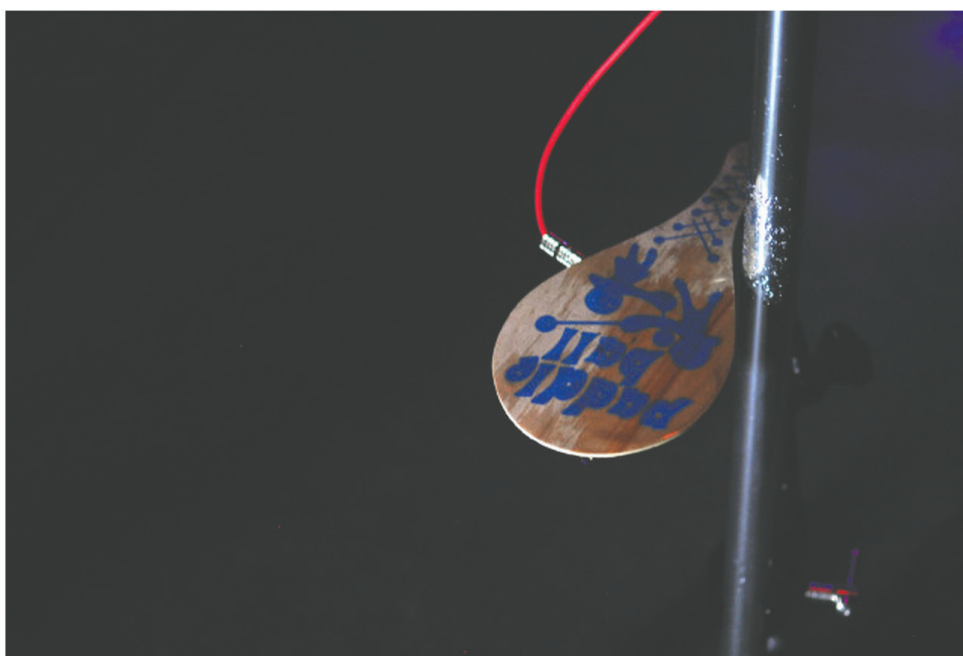
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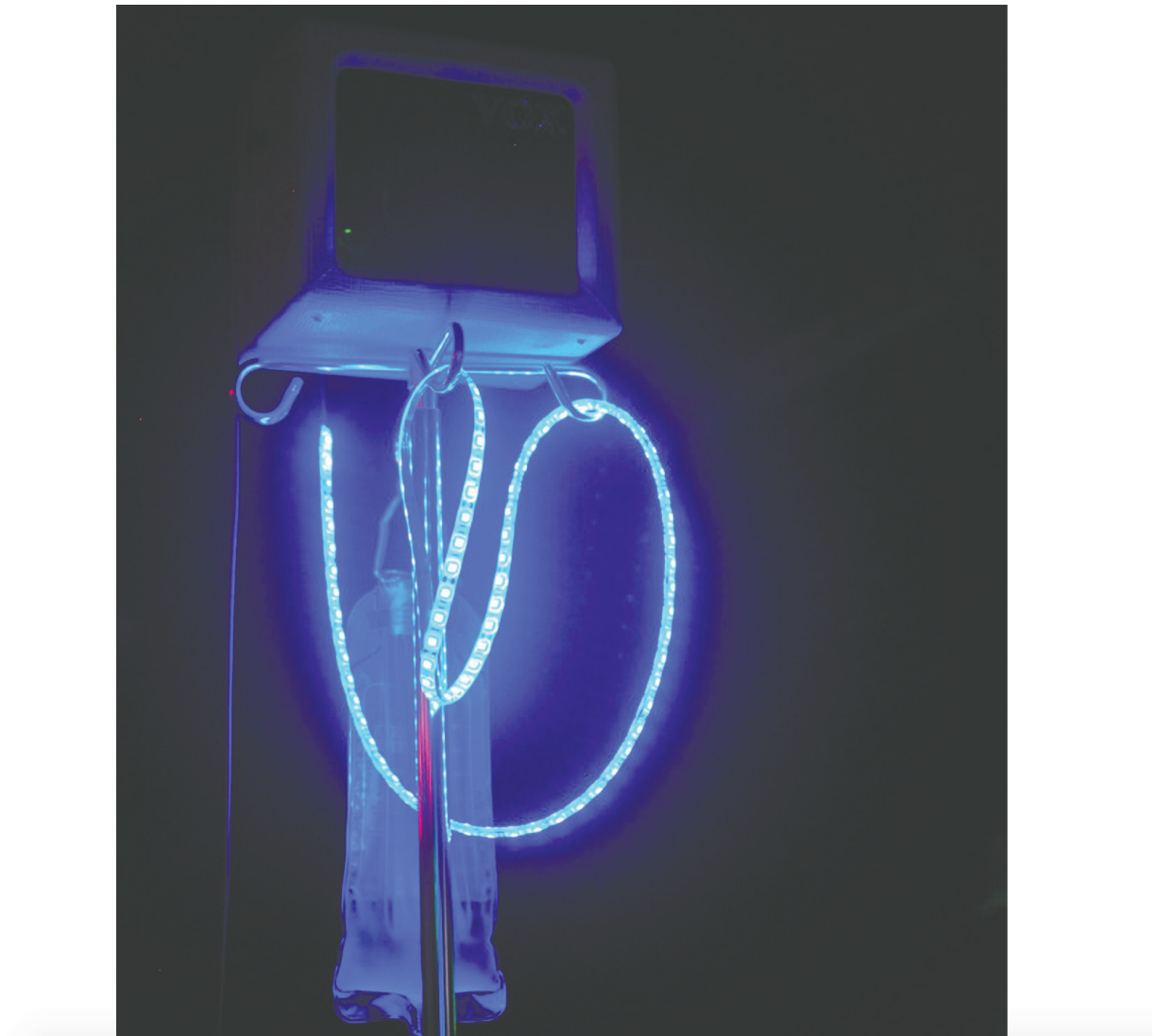
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[Anxious Spaces: Installation As Catalyst II](#) continues at the [Knockdown Center](#) (52-19 Flushing Avenue, Maspeth, Queens) through July 26. A processional performance with "IV:BPM" will occur at the [closing event](#).

Anxious Spaces

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