

# J.G. Thirlwell

**Whitney Museum of American Art;**  
Fri 2



PHOTOGRAPHS: JAY BLAKESBERG (TOP LEFT); TAYLOR GROTHERS (BOTTOM LEFT); MARK RUPP (CENTER BOTTOM)

For many musicians, performing with robotic accompanists would seem like a cheap gimmick. But for James George Thirlwell, it might be the only way to fully realize the sci-fi fantasias inside his head. The Australian-born, Brooklyn-based composer first employed nonhuman cohorts last May at a show presented by the League of Electronic Musical Urban Robots (LEMUR). Thirlwell's gritty and arresting *Prosopagnosia*—named after a condition that makes it

impossible to recognize faces—blended mechanistic *Terminator*-esque clatter with the dramatic sweep of a live string quartet.

This performance was only one in a career filled with surreal imaginative flights. Thirlwell is best known for his work as Foetus (a.k.a. *Scraping Foetus Off the Wheel*, *Foetus Inc.* and *You've Got Foetus on Your Breath*), under which moniker he's been issuing darkly theatrical industrial art pop since the early '80s. In recent years, the composer has been channeling his perverse, eclectic vision into an orchestral context. His ensemble *Manorexia*, which performs this week at the Whitney, purveys intricate, sumptuously weird chamber works. Despite the instrumentation, Thirlwell's quirky sonic palette—informed both by classical music and his stylized soundtrack for the Adult Swim cartoon *The Venture Bros.*—and penchant for dapper, garishly loud suits should keep this show irreverent and vibrant. And to those who missed the debut LEMUR show, rest assured: The robots will be on hand too.—*Hank Shteamer*