

SOUNDING NORTH

VERKSTED #4, 2005

OFFICE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART NORWAY



SONIC NORTH

VERKSTED #4, 2005

EDITORS:

SINDRE ANDERSEN, UTE META BAUER, CHRISTIANE ERHARTER

OFFICE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART NORWAY

VERKSTED #4, 2005

SONIC NORTH

Publisher: Office for Contemporary Art Norway

Editors: Sindre Andersen, Ute Meta Bauer, Christiane Erharter

Copy-editing: Peter Cripps, Neil Howard

Proof reading: Sindre Andersen, Christiane Erharter, Ole Slyngstadli

Oslo 2005 © Office for Contemporary Art Norway and the authors

OFFICE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART NORWAY

Wergelandsveien 17

NO-0167 Oslo

Norway

www.oca.no

ISBN 82-92495-03-7

ISSN 1503-8467

Distribution in Norway: Office for Contemporary Art Norway, info@oca.no

International distribution:

Vice Versa Vertrieb

info@vice-versa-vertrieb.de

www.vice-versa-vertrieb.de

All rights reserved

Installation, inner jacket: Maia Urstad, *Sound Barrier # III*, 2004

Photograph: Lars Gustav Midbøe

Layout and design: Ulf Carlsson, Oslo

Printing and binding: AIT AS e-dit, Oslo

Office for Contemporary Art Norway is a private foundation, founded by the Norwegian Ministry of Cultural and Church Affairs and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This issue is published with additional support from the Norwegian Arts Council.

Verksted is a publication series of the Office for Contemporary Art Norway.

CONTENTS

5. INTRODUCTION
Sindre Andersen, Ute Meta Bauer, Christiane Erharter
11. POSITIVE GERMS
A survey of Norway's noise
Anne Hilde Neset
25. MUSIC MATTERS
Interview with Rune Kristoffersen of Rune Grammofon
Kim Hiorthøy
39. I AND YOU
Moving the meaning in experimental music
Sindre Andersen
47. THE LOUD CHEF
Interview with Lasse Marhaug
Sindre Andersen
59. LIVE EXPERIMENTS
Experimental music and the stage
Are Mokkelbost
79. THE SEWING CLUB FROM HELL
Interview with Maja Ratkje and Hild Sofie Tafjord of Fe-mail
Christiane Erharter
95. DISCOGRAPHY
Sindre Andersen, Christiane Erharter, Are Mokkelbost,
Anne Hilde Neset

INTRODUCTION

Sindre Andersen, Ute Meta Bauer, Christiane Erharter, Editors

This issue of *Verksted* is dedicated to what is a prolific field in Norway: experimental music, sound and noise. This field has very much been part of Office for Contemporary Art Norway's programming for the last three years. *ELECTRIC LEAK - the North of it*, a compilation CD, was released at the opening party of the Nordic Pavilion Exhibition "Devil-may-care" at La Biennale di Venezia - 50th International Art Exhibition in 2003. In collaboration with Yngvild Færøy, Søsja Jørgensen, and Elin T. Sørensen of BallongMagasinet, twelve tracks of experimental electronic music from Finland, Norway and Sweden (the countries that share the Nordic Pavilion in Venice) were collected. Maja Ratkje and Hild Sofie Tafjord of Fe-mail performed at this party accompanied by DJ Sunshine (Elin Vister). The *ELECTRIC LEAK* compilation featured Fe-mail along with Åke Hodell, Hugger-Mugger, Erkki Kurenniemi, Emi Maeda, Anton Nikkilä, Tommy Olsson, Pål Asle Pettersen, Pink Twins, Alexander Rishaug, Henrik Rylander, and Single Unit.

An outsider's view is that Norway has been a minor nation in terms of music for a long time. 1960s and 70s rock and pop is really only of interest for reasons of nostalgia. At times, Norway has produced prominent names in progressive jazz and contemporary classical music - Jan Garbarek and Arne Nordheim, for example - but like all

trends they ebbed and flowed and scarcely made it to the ears of the average music listener. Only since the early 1980s has a small wave of Norwegian artists explored the major pop music markets – including Japan and the Philippines. A-ha is the most notable example of course, but the band has never been seriously ‘canonized’ by historians and musicologists. The segmentation of the music markets over the last twenty years has also given birth to serious chart success and press coverage for bands like ANNIE, Kings of Convenience, Lene Marlin, Röyksopp, and Turbonegro.

It is interesting to note that several of these commercial successes consciously refer to the sonic avant-garde (see text by Mokkelbost). Similarly, the founder members of hero bands from the 1980s like Fra Lippo Lippi and Bel Canto are still going strong, working respectively as label head of Rune Grammofon, Rune Kristoffersen, and ambient star Biosphere aka Geir Jenssen. A-ha member Magne Furuholmen has placed an elderly foot in the experimental camp and works continually as a visual artist. Underground music and attitudes have become part of the mainstream and, in these crossover areas, Norwegian music has found a fruitful niche.

We do not go into detail about the black metal scene, which constitutes its own chapter in Norwegian music history, we only state that the wave of experimental music of the last decade leaves Norway with a ‘cultural trademark’ rarely felt before. With few exceptions, any Norwegian who tried playing more or less commercial rock/pop music usually ended up plagiarising Anglo-American idols, despite any amount of ‘turbo’.

Contrary to the situation for example in Sweden, it is a widespread saying that pop and rock sung in Norwegian sounds ‘silly’, and that all serious bands should go for anglophone expressions. Maybe it would be better to view this from the opposite perspective: let the riffs be swung in dialects, and let all the rest of us become small Arne Nordheims.

Locality, though, is not the crucial aspect here. What prevents the scene from remaining provincial are the networks and discourses of musical intermediation, which simultaneously work in hierarchical and non-hierarchical fashion. It is important to be aware of the achievements of labels Rune Grammofon and Smalltown Supersound, and their respective ambassadors Rune Kristoffersen and Joakim Haugland, in connecting the interests and expressions of the established with those of the unestablished. By introducing jazz and rock to electronica and noise within the alternative music tradition, and by fitting it into patterns of 'genreless' music elsewhere in the world, they are promoting an international interest in music from Norway. In their turn, they are supported and surrounded by idealistic, innovative groupings in Oslo and beyond: labels such as Apartment, Humbug, OHM, TIBProd, and Synesthetic Recordings and people like Audun Strype, the Safe As Milk Festival crew and the numerous artists who feature in this book *Sonic North*. In addition to the grassroots work of these labels and people, the media also provide promotional and distributional channels for experimental music, sound, and noise. In 1984 the radio programme Sort Kanal (black channel) was founded by art historian Ina Blom. Though other people subsequently took over the programme, the initial idea to present obscure music still remains. Like other programmes of a lesser vintage dedicated to noise, Sort Kanal is broadcast from Oslo's student radio Radio Nova. Norwegian national radio too pays tribute to the experimental scene with the programmes of Harald Are Lund. Publications like *Ballade*, *Groove* and *The Wire* provide discursive platforms. Clubs like Dans For Voksne and BLÅ, and the numerous smaller festivals like All Ears, Numusic, Random System and Safe As Milk, connect the local scene to the rest of the world through their international line-ups, as do the mediating and supporting institutions MIC, Ny Musikk, and PNEK.

One aspect of the Norwegian scene that is visible at first sight is that it is male-dominated. Although this book does not go into identity or gender debates, we have to be aware that availability of technol-

ogy does not supersede questions of access, economics and representation.

American multimedia artist Terre Thaemlitz, for example, questions the subversive quality of electronic music and of transgender surgery, both of which use the latest technological tools as a means of representation and which, in consequence, often end up perverting them and reinforcing stereotypes on his albums *Couture Cosmetique* and *Interstices*.

Although experimental electronic music and the rise of technology can question these structures, challenges to this dimension from the alternative scene remain insufficiently critical and allow itself to be conventionalised: aesthetics are too often normalised and limited to the very formats of software or performance.

Author and *The Wire* editor Anne Hilde Neset is currently charting Norwegian noise in relation to its international context. Sindre Andersen is trying to get a grip of experimental music through defining its conception. A musician and artist himself, Are Mokkelbost gives a subjective overview of the performance of experimental music – a field which also has great economic relevance as many musicians still live from the proceeds of performing live. Interviews with protagonists of the Norwegian experimental music scene give insight in their conceptions and practices: Rune Kristoffersen of Rune Grammofon was interviewed by artist and designer Kim Hiorthøy as early as in 2003 for the now out of print book/double CD *Money Will Ruin Everything*. The edited and shortened version of the original interview presented here is published with the kind permission of Rune Kristoffersen and Kim Hiorthøy. Lasse Marhaug was interviewed by Sindre Andersen; Maja Ratkje and Hild Sofie Tafjord of Fe-mail spoke with Christiane Erharter about how to make noise music and issues to do with the male domination of the field.

From the beginning, OCA's International Studio Programme Oslo has given equal support to artists associated with music and the sonic. Michaela Melián and Thomas Meinecke from Germany discussed their work with the band FSK in summer 2003. In October 2003, Erkki Kurenniemi, the Finnish music and computer art pioneer presented his exceptional visions and electronic inventions to the Norwegian public in a talk at the National Academy of the Arts in Oslo. A presentation of his albums then followed a screening of Mika Taanila's documentary film *Future is Not What It Used To Be* at the ISP Oslo. The same autumn, laptop musicians Russell Haswell from UK and Florian Hecker from Germany were invited to talk at NOTAM and gave a collaborative concert at Dans For Voksne. Artist Katrina Daschner and her band SV Damenkraft from Vienna performed in Oslo in March 2004. Dutch visual artist Paul Devens gave a concert at Dans For Voksne and presented a sound performance with two dancers at the ISP Oslo Project Space in the autumn of 2004. Canadian sound artist Dana Samuel prepared her site-specific contributions for the sound art exhibition "The Idea Of North" at Galleri F15 in Moss in May 2005. During their stay in Norway, visual artist Anna Ceeh and psycho-physio musician Franz Pomassl – both based in Vienna where they run the music label Laton – performed live in Bergen and Oslo, and at the Barents Art Triennial in Murmansk and Kirkenes in the summer of 2005.

OCA's 2003 Christmas party witnessed the Norwegian Noise Orchestra's compositions amplified live through computer speakers attached to a Christmas tree. Renowned writer Kodwo Eshun was invited by OCA to hold a sound lecture about Sonic Fiction and its potential in electronic music at Club Detox in Kristiansand in summer 2004. For "Gap Hanoi", part of the cultural programme for the first Norwegian Royal State Visit to Vietnam, OCA organized several concerts by magne f (a solo project by Magne Furuholmen), one of them being the first ever pop concert given by foreigners on a public plaza in Hanoi. And last but not least, in spring 2005, Norwegian trumpet player Nils Petter Molvær was responsible for

the sonic prelude at the ceremony for the 1st Edvard Munch Award for Contemporary Art, followed by Ovary Action's Ingvild Krabbesund and Val Rauzier as DJs.

We would like to thank everyone who has helped make OCA's formative years a sonic enterprise too. This encompasses the artists, collaborators and authors that share with us and an engaged audience not solely the need for sonic resistance in a mainstream commodified music market, but also the pleasure and curiosity involved in extending our hearing habits with new sonic adventures.

POSITIVE GERMS

A survey of Norway's noise

Anne Hilde Neset

As you walk through the departure lounge at Oslo's Gardermoen Airport, you pass a row of shiny steel umbrellas suspended from the ceiling. Passengers are invited to stand beneath these so-called 'Sound Showers' and let themselves be drenched in sonic refreshment. The Showers are even signposted throughout the airport – toilets to the right, sound showers to the left, as though they were a Scandinavian necessity. For a brief moment you pause, watch passengers roll their luggage along, and hear the intimate purr of a woman's voice from above: "Under the ice..." A faint crackling sound of ice floes breaking up, and your mind is transported to chilly collisions on the northern seas; icebergs crashing, snowy mounds rising and collapsing into the waves. These Sound Showers might be more likely to bathe you in a cold sweat than pre-flight soul-balm, but then again, Norwegians are famously in touch with the dark side. Or so the cliché goes.

While the visual arts have been privileged in standard readings of art history, and much better textually served, music and the sonic arts have been confined to the 'entertainment' sections of shops and libraries, and the discourse around sound art remains largely

the province of the specialist. Christian Marclay's drawing "Timeline" from 1999 poignantly illustrates this dilemma. The artist used a found wall-chart showing on a graphic timeline the parallel careers of artists, architects, sculptors and literary authors. Marclay's handwritten intervention on the poster sketches in the missing links in this canon of artistic 'importance', which include the career trajectories of significant figures in contemporary music, such as John Cage, Ornette Coleman, Harry Partch, Pierre Schaeffer, Arnold Schoenberg, Iannis Xenakis, and so on.

It is a little far-fetched to imagine that the Norwegian airport authorities, with a budget to commission art throughout Oslo's new flagship airport, had this chart in mind when ordering the Sound Showers in addition to various visual and sculptural works. But the existence of the Sound Showers offers a small indication that Norway has recently woken up to sonic art and experimental music, and is now home to a blossoming scene of improvised music, young jazz players, noise experimentalists and new music composers.

NorNoise from 2004, a documentary by Norwegian filmmaker Tom Hovinbøle, surveys the attitudes and methods of various noise artists from Norway (Helge Sten aka Deathprod, Lasse Marhaug of Jazzkammer, Maja Ratkje, Origami Republika's Tore H Bøe, ARM, Asbjørn Flø, Kjell Runar Jenssen), and abroad (Masami Akita aka Merzbow, Toshimaru Nakamura, David Cotner, Francisco López, Otomo Yoshihide). This is indicative of a growing self-awareness in Norway among a milieu that has grown noticeably in the early 21st century and is currently undergoing something of a power surge. *Le Jazz Non*, the compilation album put together by Joakim Haugland, owner of the label Smalltown Supersound, in 2000, is another product that underlines the energy of noise in Norway. It was compiled in response to a CD of the same name containing only noise music from New Zealand. The original *Le Jazz Non* was compiled in 1996 by Bruce Russell, owner of the Corpus Hermeticum label and founder of the influential group The Dead C. Russell has kept Norway's

noise scene under surveillance for some time. “The first thing I heard was the second solo album by [Stavanger noise musician] Kjetil Brandsdal,” he explains. “It blew me away. I could relate to it completely, even though there were aspects of it that I didn’t understand at all. That must have been in 1997. I immediately began to tout Norway as the next big thing.” He subsequently distributed and released records by Askild Haugland, Andreas Brandal and Kjetil Brandsdal on Corpus Hermeticum. “I think, in general, Norway actually has many of the same cultural drives as New Zealand,” he continues. “It’s a peripheral nation, situated on the edge of Europe. It’s seen from outside as a bit of a backwater, so the creative people look inward and work collaboratively through ‘underground’ networks that support each other but exist outside of what might be considered legitimate culture in more ‘metropolitan’ nations. That’s a very creative hothouse for new work.”

“The noise scene in Norway is really quite small,” says Oslo based Maja Ratkje, “but it is very active, and is now noticed outside of the country’s borders.” Ratkje is one of a rare breed: a classically trained composer who seeks to cover as much sonic territory as she can. Beside being a member of the all-female quartet SPUNK, and one half of Fe-mail (her noise duo with Hild Sofie Tafjord), she still has time for an impressive solo career. “Lately I have noticed that noise has gained more and more inclusion into other scenes, like when Jazzkammer and Merzbow played at the Molde Jazz Festival and Lasse Marhaug played with [US drone rock group] SUNN O))) at the Infernofestival this year. We’ve had people who have kept going since the beginning of the 1990s and are still active, such as Tore H Bøe, Helge Sten and the boys in Jazzkammer. It means a lot for the scene and is inspiring for the next generations of noise musicians,” she explains. Maja Ratkje is a serial collaborator, having worked with musicians from diverse backgrounds such as jazz, new music, composition, experimental rock and improvisation. She was instrumental in setting up the Norwegian Noise Orchestra (NNO), a large troupe of noisemakers.

“I also know that a pure noise band existed in the first half of the 1980s in Norway, which had no name and was led by Harald Fetveit,” explains Ratkje. “Fetveit was invited to join the NNO, an informal gathering of noise musicians who meet up to play concerts. Lasse Marhaug and I dreamt up the idea for NNO in 2002. It lives its own life entirely: whoever wants to can participate, and we’ll release records wherever it suits. The group is not led by anyone, and is completely dependent on there being an active noise scene in Norway.” So far, NNO have played three concerts around Oslo, one of which was recorded. The resulting album, *Tender Love is a Bitch, NNO live at Betong 12.12.02*, appeared on the label TIBProd and featured the formidable line-up of André Borgen, Andreas Meland, Sten Ove Toft, Bjørn Hatterud, Per Gisle Galåen, Kai Mikalsen, Hild Sofie Tafjord, Sindre Andersen, Ole H Melby, Maja Ratkje, Svein Egil Hatlevik, Kjetil S Matheussen, Kim Sølve and Harald Fetveit.

An unwitting pioneer of Norwegian noise, Fetveit started playing with Øyvind Hellner and Espen Ursin in the early 1980s. They played one concert in 1985, but the rock audience didn’t take to their shimmering feedback racket. “The group never had a name,” recalls Fetveit, “just Hellner-Ursin-Fetveit. It was problematic for us to operate with titles like ‘musician’, ‘guitarist’ or ‘artist’ – and by the same token we could not think of ourselves as ‘noise musicians’ – that would be too big, and would belong to the establishment. I don’t think we’d heard about playing noise before, and used the term because it seemed like the most appropriate, but not as a genre description. We could not even agree whether we should call it music or not, and we still can’t. Punk ruled the early 1980s. Hate of authority and a constant hunger for new expressions exploded the musical frames. It was a good time for experimental rock. I listened to Merzbow and [Berlin new wave group] Die Tödliche Doris, but didn’t feel it related to what I was doing. Instead I was more drawn to artists like Diamanda Galás and Einstürzende Neubauten for inspiration.”

Background noise

In the second decade of the 20th century, the Italian Futurists famously tired of the romantic sweep in the contemporary music of their time, and declared it meaningless in an industrialized society immersed in the “noises of trams, of automobile engines, of carriages and brawling crowds”. They adjured their readers to “hear again another *Eroica* or *Pastorale*” in the sounds of the modern city. The Futurist composer Luigi Russolo imagined and designed instruments that could be played in orchestras and which produce refreshing atonal sounds commensurate with modern life – the *intonarumori* (noise intoners). Claiming that ‘musical sound’ contains only limited timbres, and reducing orchestras to five classes of sound, Russolo exclaimed in his manifesto “The Art of Noises” (1913): “We must break out of this limited circle of sounds and conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds.” Russolo distinguished between musical sound and noise, preferring the latter. He continued, “Sound, estranged from life, always musical, something in itself, an occasional not a necessary element, has become for our ear what for the eye is a too familiar sight. Noise instead, arriving confused and irregular from the irregular confusion of life, is never revealed to us entirely and always holds innumerable surprises.” Thus Russolo, with enthusiasm and exuberance, set the tone for future generations of sound explorers.

A few years later, Edgard Varèse dismissed the conventional distinction between noise and music preferring to define music as ‘organised sound’. In his essay “The Liberation of Sound” he considers sound as a spatial as well as a time-based entity. He describes his own music as a collision of “sound masses”: blocks of sound moving at different speeds and angles, almost like astral bodies in a universe. In his composition for percussion instruments, *Ionisation* (1929–31), he used a siren as a major element. And the most famous example to use elements of noise was George Antheil’s *Ballet Mécanique* (1926), where the composer called for an aeroplane en-

gine to be added to the orchestral forces. Similarly, the Norwegian composer Fartein Valen, whose compositions have a melancholic tone derived from the Romantic era, caused a stir with his atonal compositions between the 1920s–40s. His decision to evoke the sounds of bombed warships and the cries of drowning sailors outside his native Valevåg in his *Symphony No 2* (1944) – deemed outrageous at the time – gestures back to the Futurists as well as forward to the more violent tendencies of electronic music.

The American composer and theorist Henry Cowell published Varèse's *Ionisation*, among other New Music scores. Cowell was described by John Cage as the "open sesame for New Music in America". Cowell's unconventional use of instruments directly influenced Cage's *Sonatas & Interludes for Prepared Piano* (1948) and also generally the more unorthodox treatment of instruments in avant-garde jazz, sound sculpture, etc. In his 1929 essay "The Joys of Noise", Cowell set out a deconstruction of the binary opposition between music and noise, arguing that the latter was always integral to the former. He argues that there will always be unwanted resonances in the tone of all musical instruments, unless you are in an acoustic laboratory, which, he claims, is the only place a pure tone can exist. He elaborates: "Since the 'disease' of noise permeates all music, the only hopeful course is to consider that the noise germs, like the bacteria of cheese, is a good microbe, which may provide previously hidden delights to the listener, instead of producing musical oblivion. Although existing in all music, the noise-element has been to music as sex to humanity, essential to its existence, but impolite to mention, something to be cloaked by ignorance and silence." Consider our obsession with noise reduction systems like Dolby, Muzak to cloak ambient sounds in supermarkets, and executive chairs with inbuilt anti-noise systems, and Cowell's fear of sanitation becomes frighteningly relevant.

The tape recorder played a crucial role in blurring the lines between musical and non-musical sounds. For the first time in history, com-

posers could separate a sound from its source. Sounds could be stored, cut and manipulated, and composers could bypass musical notation, instruments and performers altogether. It was no longer necessary to manoeuvre an aeroplane engine onto stage: you could simply record its roar and blend it right into a composition. The tape recorder gave artists access to (in John Cage's words) "the entire field of sound".

French electro-acoustic composer Pierre Schaeffer was the first to set up a studio specifically designed for audio experimentation. In 1948, in a department of the Radio France headquarters in Paris, he started experimenting with what he called "sound objects" and eventually coined the term *musique concrète* to describe their composition. Varèse's notion of sound as colliding masses in space was now given an extra dimension. Schaeffer's collaborator Pierre Henry, and later composers such as Iannis Xenakis and Karlheinz Stockhausen, would subsequently explore the spatial elements of sound further, by working with architects and setting up early systems for surround-sound. Schaeffer broadcast a 'Concert of Noises' on Radio France in 1948, which consisted of "Études" composed entirely from recordings of train whistles, canal boats, pots and pans, and the interior workings of pianos and violins. Studios of a similar kind were later set up throughout the Western world, including the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center and Bell Labs in USA, Studio für elektronische Musik des WDR Köln in Germany and the BBC Radiophonic Workshop in the UK. By the 1960s, electro-acoustic music was an established, but not necessarily popular, form in most Western countries, although in Norway at that time there was no such studio or tradition. Norway's most prominent contemporary composer, Arne Nordheim, joined a course at the Institute of Sonology in Utrecht, The Netherlands in the 1950s. "There was a large presentation of electronic and concrète music in Paris in 1954," he said in a 2004 interview in the British music magazine *The Wire*. "It was a kind of two-week mini-festival created by Radio France. There, I heard Pierre Schaeffer's & Pierre Henry's *Symphonie pour*

un homme seul and Schaeffer's railway piece *Étude aux chemins de fer*. I was very much taken with these strange things. There were demonstrations of techniques, like slowing the tape's speed to create an effect of modulating down an octave." Back in his Utrecht studio he was inspired by what he had seen in Paris. "I produced an enormous amount of sonic elements. I brought home a whole package full of beautiful sounds and I went to the broadcasting people in Norway and they were so open and said go ahead – here's a room, equipment, a technician." Yet the Norwegian cultural establishment had other opinions. "They wanted conservative folkloristic things which were unacceptable to my taste."

Nordheim chose to move to Warsaw to work and study at the Studio Experymentaine at Polish Radio. Nordheim, however, is now a cultural institution in Norway, and widely commissioned by the cultural establishment he once fought. He is considered the father of electronic music within Norway and has long been championed by younger musicians and labels. In 1998 the Norwegian record label Rune Grammofon arranged a meeting between generations which resulted in the CD *Nordheim Transformed*. Helge Sten (aka Deathprod), a prolific electronic musician and producer, was set the task of reworking Nordheim's *Electric* together with Geir Jenssen (aka Biosphere), who is perhaps Norway's best known current electronica artist. The resulting pieces were also performed live. "I liked it very much," Nordheim says about the collaboration. "I like the idea that music is not something which belongs to just the creator of a work, but it can go on and on."

Defining discord

Since the early 20th century, noise has been an ever-present element in music and music theory, and subsequently a genre in itself. The status of noise versus music is profoundly subjective. A frequent ideological stance with regard to noise is that it expresses

'truth', in contrast to programmatic/melodic music, which represents the bourgeois deception of harmony. Another conception of noise equates it with meaninglessness: it jams all available frequencies and represents a state of unconsciousness, even death. In his *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss investigated different rituals and ceremonies performed by indigenous tribes and peoples around the world. He found that noise-making meant largely the same thing in very different environments; noise and noise-making instruments were associated with death, decomposition, social disorder and cosmic disruption. "The function of noise," he writes, "is to draw attention to an anomaly in the unfolding of a syntagmatic sequence." If music is a language, then noise is the blockage of that language, a jamming of the code, an interference with the signal.

William S Burroughs' recorded piece *The Last Words Of Dutch Schultz* (1965) portrays the true story of gangster Arthur Flegenheimer, aka Dutch Schultz, who died in 1935 from multiple gunshot wounds. In hospital, the police attempted to question him in his last hours but received nothing but a stream of babble, meaningless sentences and words. Burroughs' piece is a sound poem in which he reads Schultz's ramblings in his familiar gravel voice punctuated with the high-pitched squeaks of a fast-forwarded tape reel, the noise representing Schultz's mental slippages.

Whereas Burroughs' screeches depicted Schultz close to death's door, Latvian psychologist Konstantin Raudive caused a minor media sensation a few years later in 1970 when he claimed to have heard the voices of the deceased in the 'dead air' of static between radio stations. Raudive claimed to hear polyphonic murmurings from beyond the grave, and recorded 70,000 such voices. Raudive and Swedish artist and academic Friedrich Jürgenson were the earliest pioneers of the Electronic Voice Phenomenon (EVP). Recordings on magnetic tape (and increasingly the phonograph) allowed the dead to 'speak' – and now radio was letting us communicate with the

dead in real time, much like the poet in Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée* (1950). Orphée, sitting in his car, suddenly picks up messages from a dead poet, Cegeste, transmitted in a coded language within the crackle between radio stations. The scene carries an echo of British agents' resistance broadcasts from occupied France – an important reference for Cocteau – but equally these are transmissions coming from the zone of the dead, full of cryptic meaning without revealing the key that would decode them.

Conversely, noise can also be thought of as a 'secret language': a code that remains undeciphered. The Austrian laptop collective Farmers Manual creates unrefined digital noises. Their live shows have an MS-DOS-like austerity: bits and binary digits squishing around the audio canvas, bleeps and beeps that hold the promise of meaning among intransigent digital frequencies.

For both Russolo and Lévi-Strauss – albeit with markedly different intentions – noise implied anomaly, confusion and disturbance. For Russolo it was an invigorating message to the world, for Lévi-Strauss a death ritual. The French economist and thinker Jacques Attali investigated the politics of noise in his book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1977). Attali, also an advisor to the Mitterrand government, argues that music, like economics and politics, is fundamentally a matter of organising dissonance and subversion. Sound, being immaterial, moves faster than any other force and so prefigures social relations: sound and music as prophecy. Since noise, according to Attali, is generally considered negative and unwanted by mainstream society, it is an effective means of disrupting political or other social systems.

Thirty years on, Attali's argument, though influential, has become largely obsolete. Noise is less about opposition or subversion in society, than subversion of one's own mind – of an individual need to systematise, theorise and categorise. Noise wants to overwhelm, obliterate, immerse and soak through all the senses. It jams all fre-

quencies to reboot your mind into sensory oblivion, to obliterate common sense.

The Oslo musician Lasse Marhaug is perhaps Norway's most prominent noise purist. Having started out dubbing cassette tapes at the wrong speed in the 1980s, Marhaug discovered a whole new world of abstract sound and has now moved on to laptop and sound processing. He has collaborated extensively with Norwegian players and musicians from abroad, such as Merzbow from Japan and Chicago's Kevin Drumm.

"Noise describes the act of working freely with sound," Marhaug explains. "It doesn't have the elements of rhythm and melody central to other forms of music. It's been around for a long time, since we have been able to manipulate sounds. It's had different names: *musique concrète*, tape music, scum, industrial, cut-up, collage. I like a lot of artists who use noise as a representation, be it political, personal, sexual, confrontational, humorous or informational. But my music is noise for noise's sake – for the beauty of it. I'm interested in the emotions, images and feelings you can evoke through use of sound – both my own and those of the audience. I have no specific intentions concerning what my sounds should (or can) represent – I'm driven by a naive fascination for investigating how sounds affect us." The power balance Marhaug identifies is a personal one, not the traditional opposition of artist against society. He continues, "there is a balance of power in noise music. Especially in live performances, where the audience submit themselves to often high volumes and intense situations. Some noise artists would perhaps see this as a sort of SM play for the ears, but I don't feel like much of a sadist. For me it is more of a collective sound experience. Like having my friends over for dinner. I'm the chef."

"For me, noise is first and foremost sheer sonic experience," explains Maja Ratkje. "After that, noise has a political function in that it represents something new, that can't easily be categorised. Noise

is still experienced by most people as something threatening and nihilistic, and partly also sadistic. Noise seen in relation to the rock aesthetic is often easier to digest if the expression can be said to come from some of the same. Merzbow broke with rock 25 years ago at the same time as he worshipped the essence of rock's energy. Noise has so many references. Composers such as Xenakis and Varèse, and the idea about *musique concrète* with Pierre Schaeffer, have been very important for my view of music; absolute music, sound which is set apart from the source that represents it. After having toured in the USA, I can see that noise there has another extra-musical meaning than what it had in Europe. The noise scene there is much more connected to DIY rock, and the political has a more central role. But it's not so strange that noise has such a role in a society where the commercial market puts down all premises for those who would like to make music but don't fit into the institutions. A society which chooses not to support new creations where they have so many great people, who are completely dependent on ideology to stay alive. It's natural that the music then is connected to a general revolt against society. Sometimes I think that revolt takes precedence over the quality – only expression matters – but there are also so many great groups, for example Wolf Eyes. Sometimes I also wish that there was a similar engagement amongst Western European noise musicians – it can easily be a bit much 'art', if you see what I mean." Maja Ratkje has toured extensively with US discord Dadaists Wolf Eyes, and in 2005 her duo Fe-mail collaborated with the group at the Kongsberg Jazz Festival, one example of an institutional festival reaching to the outer limits of noise making within their programme.

Stavanger based noise musician Sindre Bjerga is behind the Gold Soundz label and fanzine. "It started as a paper fanzine sometime in 1996; I wanted to write about new and exciting music that inspired me," enthuses Bjerga. The fanzine became a label and vehicle for his own Fibo-Trespo collaboration with fellow noisenik Kjetil Brandsdal. "Noise to me has always been sort of the punk rock ver-

sion of avant-garde music,” he continues. “I’ve been a huge admirer of electronic music from the 1960s/70s for a long time – Pierre Henry, Schaeffer, Stockhausen, Xenakis, Messiaen, etc. At the same time I’ve never been a fan of ‘intellectualised music’, but I’m totally fascinated with people composing – or improvising for that matter – this grandiose, larger-than-life music. I mean, even on those Deutsche Grammophon LP covers, Stockhausen often looks like a raving madman. Which he probably is. Noise for the mere shock value doesn’t really cut it any more. I really don’t like much of that ‘Hey, check it out! I’m so anti-social!’ kind of noise. It’s a matter of subscribing to other aesthetic values – i.e. finding ‘beauty’ in unsuspected places – but noise is also sort of a secret language. It can be a bit of a ‘geek club’, really.”

Meanwhile Harald Fetveit is aware that much of the politics has vanished from noise, but he has found a different means of political expression in improvisation. “The connection between music and politics in the 1980s was perhaps vaguely defined but very determined. The Cold War was still on. Demonstrations could attract large numbers of people even in Norway, and loose agents would fight the police all over Europe. It was satisfying to do something no one else could define as good or bad. It smelt of revolt. From this point of view I’m not really sure why people start making noise music now. The connection between noise and art in the last few years is perhaps more because the art scene has let noise in, rather than visual artists having any particular interest in noise. I presume each and every noise artist has their own agenda and probably wants to defy generalisation. Everything that has to do with computers and digital media has changed the picture completely. The so-called information stream was so small in the 1980s that it was impossible to know what other people did at the same time. That made it possible to break the frames of reference locally. That break became a noticeable gesture and a threat to the establishment; the most important thing, perhaps, was that curiosity was preserved.” He points out the utopian notions around unstructured improvisation:

“Without wanting to speak on behalf of anyone, I think the NNO can show a kind of political attitude today. Someone who plays with NNO has to give up all control, but at the same time do their own thing. The only thing which can ruin an NNO concert is if someone tries to control or take responsibility for the situation. By being improvised, noise is connected to general thoughts around improvisation, which is also true for other types of expression, and which is all about acting from your own experience and not to give in to authorities or systems.”

If music is a system, then noise is the opposite. An unstructured, unarticulated eruption – an explosion of thought and intention not shaped or modulated by language. Noise forces hearing to spill across into the other senses: we don't just hear noise, we are *subjected* to it; fazed and unsettled, we become 'noised'. We hear with our skin and skull and teeth and the ego begins to erode. Curiously, noise's ability to scatter the senses is shared with intensely pleasurable sound. Sacred sounds, chants and shamanic drones attempt to discover the principles of noise within music, like Henry Cowell's friendly bacteria. While the Gardermoen Sound Showers may offer tired travellers a gentle sonic shampoo – or at least bemusement – it is the tightly knit, immensely active noise scene dotted all around Norway which provides the real exfoliation of the mind.

MUSIC MATTERS

Interview with Rune Kristoffersen of Rune Grammofon

Kim Hiorthøy

This is an edited and shortened version of an interview done in 2003. The original version was published in the double CD/book *Money Will Ruin Everything* (Rune Grammofon, 2003). With the kind permission of Rune Kristoffersen and Kim Hiorthøy.

Rune Kristoffersen (born 1957) is the head of Rune Grammofon, an independent music label that started in 1997 in Oslo. In the 1980s Kristoffersen was one half of the well-known Norwegian pop duo Fra Lippo Lippi.

Up to now, Rune Grammofon has released around fifty CDs, one DVD, one LP and a book, most notably by artists like Arne Nordheim, Supersilent, SPUNK, Alog, Nils Økland, and Food.

Kim Hiorthøy: I think you have to start by telling me about your background. How did you end up where you are now?

Rune Kristoffersen: Then we have to start with my first serious encounter with music – that was when I heard Jimi Hendrix, when

I was thirteen years old. That was a turning-point for me. I immediately went out and bought every record of his that I could find. Then I bought my first guitar and started to play. Music became the only thing that mattered. I played in different bands; I began to write my own music. And then I started Fra Lippo Lippi with some friends.

KH: When was this and how old were you?

RK: I was 21. We started playing together around 1978/79. That was the first proper thing. Before we only played cover versions, blues, and made a few weak attempts at playing our own songs. But then we started to practice regularly, with our own material. This was right in the middle of punk and new wave, and everyone was making records. Everyone did everything themselves. DIY. And so we decided, if everyone else is doing it, we had to do it, too. So we did. We released a 7-inch EP with Fra Lippo Lippi on our own label. Then we signed a contract with a Norwegian indie company and released two albums with them. Then we did a third album on our own label, which sparked the interest of Virgin Records in London. And that became the start of a five-year-long pop career, which was all I did from 1985 to 1990.

KH: And what happened after those five years?

RK: Some more stuff happened before that. One thing was that we were in Los Angeles and made an album for Virgin with Walter Becker from Steely Dan producing. That record was supposed to help us break into the American market, but it never got released there. This was mainly due to financial problems at the local branch of the record company. So then the bottom sort of fell out... of everything. We did release a few records later on, on other labels, but it kind of fizzled out.

KH: What year was that?

RK: The one we didn't get released in the USA was in 1987. Then we released another one in 1989 before we were back on our own

label with a final album, I think in 1992. By then there wasn't really any financial basis to keep going any more, and we were getting a little sick of the whole thing; popularity was waning, and so we had to find other things to do. So what I did then was to be a teacher for five years. This was 1990 to 1995 I am talking about now. And then, in 1995 I began working at Grappa Musikkforlag, as label manager for ECM.

KH: How did you get that job?

RK: I replied to an ad in the newspaper.

KH: What was that like? I mean to be in an institution like ECM and everything.

RK: To me this job was the only thing I could imagine doing in the record industry. I didn't have any desire to work for a big record company. And this seemed like the perfect job – I had known about ECM since the 1970s, and as you say, it's an institution. And it's one of the really credible indie companies that have kept going, so in that way it was great.

KH: When did you get the idea to start Rune Grammofon?

RK: I started thinking about it in 1997. I'd been working for Grappa for two years. But I had been involved in making records before, both with my own music and a couple of times with other artists. With ECM I was working with already finished products. That was an interesting thing to do but I had always wanted to work with artists from the very beginning, to follow the whole process. And then a few things happened that made me think that maybe this was the time to try it. And one of those things was meeting Helge Sten¹.

KH: How did you meet him?

RK: He came to the ECM offices together with Audun Strype². Audun had some business to take care of there, and he wanted me to meet Helge, as far as I recall. I knew about Helge, but I had never met him. And then a very strange coincidence occurred: I had just come back from London where I had seen Veslefrekke play the London Jazz Festival. And I thought they were really great. Veslefrekke was not really what I would have considered to be a free jazz group, even if I had not listened to that much free jazz at the time. I have always thought that free jazz was a very intriguing concept, that this idea of playing freely... that it is a very good idea. But it doesn't always work, and it's not always very exciting to listen to. But this group was good. It was, quite simply, a fantastic concert, and it turned all my preconceived notions upside-down. But the point was that when Helge came into my office he told me, without knowing that I had been to this concert, that he had been talking to the boys about creating a new group with them³. And, well, that just struck me as a very good idea. Because I knew what Helge was into, and I had just seen Veslefrekke. It seemed like the most brilliant idea.

KH: And then you thought, "I have to start a label"?

RK: I guess I had already decided I would, so I said to Helge that if they wanted to make a record I wanted to be the one to release it. And that was fine with him. So that's what happened. The other thing was that I was trying, for some reason, to find Nordheim's electronic music on CD. But after visiting a couple of supposedly well-stocked record stores in Oslo, I discovered that it didn't exist. My immediate thought was that this material must be collected on a CD and made available. As it was, some of the works of Norway's perhaps most highly profiled composer were not really available in Norway, which says a lot about a lot of things.

KH: I assume that Arne Nordheim must have been important for you at that point, and had been for a long time.

RK: I knew about Nordheim, but as a matter of fact I did not know much about his electronic work. But I had heard other things, *The Tempest*, for instance, which I thought was really good. So I contacted Nordheim, and he was very enthusiastic. He was worried that his electronic music would be forgotten if it was not documented in a proper way. Suddenly I had two really strong projects on the go, and Supersilent insisted that theirs be a triple CD. This would make a mark at the very beginning, I thought. A triple CD with Supersilent, and Nordheim's electronic music – this was great.

KH: What kinds of doubts and uncertainties did you have about starting your own label, if any? What problems did you imagine might arise?

RK: Well, starting a record company for marginal music in a small country like Norway is not exactly something you learn how to do in business school. I thought about the high expenses in Norway, how difficult it could be to find foreign distributors who could pay their bills, and the fact that our local market is very small and has changed a great deal in the course of the years. It was not the same as it had been when we made records at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s. Then you could release anything and it would sell a thousand copies in Norway. Anything at all, literally. People bought it.

KH: Because there was such great interest?

RK: Because there was such great interest, and it was a very creative period. Good records were made every week, both in Norway and abroad, and people just had to have them. It is not like that any more. In Norway today you can have pop artists whose records are released on major record companies, and they will sell maybe 300 copies – you know what I mean? Times have really changed. So there was some uncertainty. And then there was the question of packaging – it was very important for me to get it right. Getting it right was essential.

KH: Regarding packaging, how did the two of us meet?

RK: I guess it was through Helge Sten. From what I had seen, I thought the Motorpsycho covers were the best record covers being made in Norway at the time. So you were, in a way, my first choice. But for some reason I thought that you were a bit unapproachable, or a bit strict, and that you only would work for Motorpsycho and just said no to everything else. But Helge said, "I can talk to Kim."

KH: That was in the autumn of 1997?

RK: Yes. And what was really important was that we found out that we were on the same wavelength, which was an advantage. Because you can always find someone who is good at doing something, but then perhaps they also listen to Dire Straits, you know? And then you might not have the best kind of communication. So I felt that the fact that we even liked the same kinds of music was a real bonus. I felt that things were falling into place, and that it would be a good thing to do.

KH: But when you had begun, and had released the first two CDs, what kind of idea did you have for developing your profile, and where did you intend to find new music to release?

RK: Around that time you couldn't just go out and find a great artist every month, like you almost can now. And then Grappa got offered Chocolate Overdose, who they thought would be more suitable for Rune Grammofon. So I listened to them, and thought they were good. And just then I thought - I got this naive idea - that it would be cool to have both Arne Nordheim and a rock band on the same label... because I've always had a very broad interest in music. When we started Fra Lippo Lippi and began to make pop music, I listened just as much to The Residents and This Heat. If it's good, it's good. So I thought I'd do a little bit of missionary work, saying: this is possible. It is possible to like different kinds of music. That was the idea then,

and that is what it was like in the beginning. But as I said, people were not exactly lining up to have their records released on Rune Grammofon, and definitely not anyone good. So when that record turned up, it was like, yeah, it is good, let's release it. Let's get this thing going! Instead of waiting six months for a fucking great electronica record, we went with a very good rock band.

KH: You say 'electronica', but if I ask you what the criteria are, now, for a record to be released on Rune, how would you describe the label's musical profile?

RK: I'm still pretty open to most things, but I think that we've got ourselves into a line of a bit of experimental electronica slash improvised music, contemporary music... somewhere around there.

KH: That sounds like an issue of *The Wire*.

RK: It does. But I can't release three albums every month, and it increasingly seemed like a good idea to have a more deliberate profile... and so we ended up with that kind of music. And that's because there's a very prolific atmosphere for that kind of music in Norway right now. There are lots of good things coming out, things that I think are really good and exciting.

KH: Do you make money from Rune Grammofon?

RK: That's been minimal. Almost everything is invested in new releases. Recently I've also needed to hire a part-time assistant.

KH: Because Rune Grammofon is not what you live off. You still have your regular job at Grappa⁴.

RK: Rune Grammofon started as a hobby project, and in many ways that's what it still is. Like you said, I'm on the staff at Grappa, Norway's oldest independent record company. My boss, Helge Westbye, lets

me fool around with my 'hobby' when I have the time. He's also involved in Rune Grammofon as a co-owner and helping hand, so it's actually quite natural. I needed his blessing to start a label in the work situation I was in. I presented the idea to him, and he liked it right away. In 2002 I paid myself a few thousand NOK for the first time since I started the company. After five years, at the end of the year. I'm sure I could have bought myself a fancy car too, but I'm really cautious when it comes to money and wouldn't do anything to jeopardize the label. And there has to be money for new releases. If not, Rune Grammofon would already be history. I want Rune Grammofon to last for a long time. I feel that we're in the middle of something good.

KH: We still have to be doing this when we are old!

RK: Exactly. And that's why almost everything is used to finance new productions, like I explained before. The idea is to build up a good, substantial catalogue, get it to stand firm on its own, and have a platform that will enable us to continue releasing recordings from the artists we already have, at the same time as finding new ones, and making this company into something really good, something we can be a little bit proud of: something we did, which was good.

KH: I've often thought that I'm the only one making money from Rune Grammofon, since I'm not running any risk; I'm paid a set amount for each cover.

RK: But the way things are now, I'm not really running any real risk either; but if I were to, I could be running a really high risk. I would have to have a lot of money, but it's not impossible that I'm now at the point where I might try and pull in other financial interests that would enable me to do this full time... But having said that, I also have to say that I enjoy working at Grappa. I like working in this environment, where lots of things are going on, instead of sitting at home, or alone in a tiny office.

KH: Isn't there the possibility you'd then feel under even more pressure, that you would feel that you were forced to... well, that it would be a tougher job if you were doing it alone? And that you would be more...

RK: Yes, and there is no guarantee that the label would be any better because of it.

KH: Or any more fun to work with.

RK: That's right. But on the other hand, the reason why it should be done, perhaps, is that I now feel there are things I should be doing with Rune Grammofon that I don't manage to get done – like trying to do more serious promotion in the USA, for instance. Or in Europe, for that matter. There's just not time to do it all... Just in general to do more practical things to place the records more firmly in people's consciousness.

KH: But still, what is it like to run a label as a brand? – because there seems to be a big difference between labels in this regard. Some have a very clear profile, others not. And Rune Grammofon, at least in my eyes, would have to be called a label with a very clear profile – in the sense that the label itself is better known than the individual artists. There are lots of bands you could name, but you wouldn't know what label they're on, especially when it comes to pop music. Do people know what labels household-name pop artists are on? So I would be tempted to say that Rune Grammofon is related more closely to labels like Blue Note or Mo'Wax, or Warp for that matter – labels that have some kind of identity – and people get an affinity to the label itself. How conscious are you of this? Is it only important to release records?

RK: It has always been important to have a distinct profile and for the records to be recognisable. My initial idea was that the profile should be evident in the first thing you see, namely the cover.

This I thought was vital; it was really necessary. I mean, I wouldn't have bothered starting a label where we released records in plastic covers, with different stuff on it, and everything was a mess. I've always liked labels with a distinct profile, like 4AD or early Factory. So that was incredibly important. And I thought that if I was going to start my own label, then that should be my own ego-thing. A record can be released on Rune Grammofon only because I like it, even if I know it won't sell for shit. Or, if I have the chance to release a record that I know will sell loads, but I don't like - I won't release it.

KH: And ECM?

RK: Of course ECM; ECM, Factory, 4AD, Blue Note, Tzadik. Labels I really appreciate. Established and run by people who love music. With me it's such that if I hear something I like on a certain label, I'll check out the other things. I might not like all the music so much, but you get to explore a little, find new things. And that's what I hope for: that people who discover Supersilent will perhaps also discover Alog.

KH: But doesn't that cut both ways? That when a label has such a distinct profile, it can also become excluding...

RK: Hopefully not. Exclusive in a positive sense, not...

KH: You're not afraid that Rune Grammofon will turn into an elitist thing?

RK: No... well, yes, of course, but what I hope will work against that is that I really want the releases to be readily available to people. I don't want a situation where you have to go to some special place and practically have to submit an application to be able to buy the record. I want them to be available to everyone in the simplest possible way.

KH: What's your viewpoint in relation to the record sleeves? – because they're pretty enigmatic. They don't give away much information about what kind of music is on the record. What do the artists think about the covers? You and I alone decide on the final design, and the artists don't get much of a say. Have there been any conflicts or discouragement from them, or anyone else, in this respect?

RK: No, very little, actually.

KH: Because even if these things are the result of your desire to have a strong label profile, one would assume that taking a stance like that doesn't come without any costs.

RK: So far there have been fewer problems than I feared. There are a few artists who we've had some discussions with before we agreed on things. Arne Nordheim, of course, thinks that the print's too small because he can't see very well, but he thinks they're great. I think perhaps more than the fact that the graphic profile has been pretty severe, what gets people irritated sometimes is the lack of information on there. But I've never been eager to see information; I have a little bit of that old cliché in me that it's the music that really matters.

KH: Maybe the covers should have only text then, thoroughly describing the kind of music you're getting – if that's the thing, that the music is what's really important. I sometimes think it is a little affected, or even arrogant to make covers like ours.

RK: Of course, it could be only text, but... Again, I've only my own point of view to go on in a way, because I like to own records that I think are special. They can be special in any way: the cover is good, it looks good, or it has some kind of information that I find interesting. What can I say? I've just followed what I felt was good. I mean, we don't think about how it could fit in better in the record shop, or who would be more interested in this particular record, or...

KH: But there's an information sticker on some of the most recent ones.

RK: That's right, we sold out a little there. But there is a balance. Because on the one hand, we want to make something good, and then we're both a little stubborn, we want to follow up the line we've laid down for this, and if people don't get it, then...

KH: ...to hell with them?

RK: Right. It is like that! Because this is our thing, and it's a good thing, and sooner or later... And then people come and they say, you know, these are really great covers, but maybe, you know, you need to be a little more realistic. It doesn't have to be the person who buys the record; it could be the salesperson, or the distributor, or someone in the shop. We have to take into consideration that they get hundreds of records every week, and not think that every time they get a new Rune Grammofon record they all start jumping up and down, cheering; 'Yees! The new Rune Grammofon release!' You know? We're so into what we're doing that we sometimes get a bit lost. But if you go to London, to the Virgin Megastore or HMV, and see how many records they have, well... And we're doing this non-commercial music in tiny Norway... Do we actually want to try and reach people, real people, or do we want to stay permanently enigmatic and difficult to deal with? It's a balance, always.

KH: But when people run a company, they like to talk about 'growth'. You have to 'expand', and so on. What would it mean for a label like Rune Grammofon to grow, not least in relation to the type of music that Rune Grammofon releases? Because obviously a label like ours can't grow in the same way that a major company can. There's a limit.

RK: Of course. In our way, or in its way, Rune Grammofon has been growing continually, since we started, in its own modest way. And

that's good. Money was never the motivating factor for starting Rune Grammofon, and I'm a strong believer in the idea that Rune Grammofon can be a small, but beautiful thing. I don't have any real 'growth' ambitions. Or, well, I would like to see, both for my own sake and the artists' sake, that Rune Grammofon could 'grow' to a certain level. But I don't know if I'm comfortable with the idea that Rune Grammofon could suddenly become a new Mute, or a new Factory, or something like that. If I could get to a level where I could operate independently in a good way, together with perhaps one other person, then that would be everything I could ever ask for. Of course I want the artists on Rune Grammofon to sell records and be satisfied with selling records and so on, and in that way I want to grow, but I'm not interested in growing into a bunch of problems. I'm really afraid that expansion and money and the financial end of things could destroy a really good thing. It worries me. I am worried that a certain type of expansion would ruin things.

Footnotes

- ¹ Helge Sten (aka Deathprod) is a member of improv band Supersilent and collaborator with Biosphere, Motorpsycho and Food.
- ² Audun Strype is a legendary sound engineer in Norway. His company Strype Audio was established as a provider of technical services for recording studios and music producers in Oslo in 1985 and started working with mastering in 1990. Audun Strype is the man behind the scenes who worked with almost everyone in the Norwegian music field – be it black metal, pop, noise – in studios and mastering processes.
- ³ Supersilent was formed by the alliance of the existing improvisation group Veslefrekk (Arve Henriksen, Ståle Storløkken, Jarle Vespestad) with producer and sound manipulator Helge Sten. Supersilent is, in a sense, the flagship band of Rune Grammofon, and seems to embody the label's manifesto.
- ⁴ For the past two years Rune Kristoffersen has been working full-time with Rune Grammofon. The Grappa office is still his workplace and the label headquarter.

I AND YOU

Moving the meaning in experimental music

Sindre Andersen

Music – as we know and love it – needs no definitions, it needs movement: movement consisting more or less of friction and of conscious communication which is more or less problematic. And the more problematic – though still fairly ‘easy listening’ – the more experimental it gets. With this essay I wish to share some examples and thoughts as to how our concept of experimental music functions and how it creates problems. How ‘alternative’ music opens for alternative viewpoints and alternates in movements of pre- and post-listening, and how music depends on systematic thinking and *vice versa*.

As human beings, we all individually encounter music before language – before language can become one’s mother tongue, it is music. And later language *again* becomes music – so that music (once again) can become language. Having got used to music, and slowly learnt what it is and means, we relate certain experiences and psychological phenomena to it. At this point in time, we are ready to distinguish between this time and that time, this rhythm and that music. We recognise the impossibility of comprehending *music itself*.

The main problem is only evaded, however, when one imposes a definition on what music possibly is. As William Bennett of Whitehouse says "...everything can be music, you just have to present it in the context of music. Every gallery has art – so, similarly, every concert, every record has music." This is true, but then concert venues and records also need to have something extra, which influences the music and its practical functionality. It is hard to define what this extra is, but it constitutes a significance that depends essentially on what people expect from music, and how it influences them. When we heard experimental music back in the days before we got 'stuck in' it, its experimental dimension was being conveyed *by somebody to you*, because somebody was letting you know about people doing experiments.

In other words, the concept of 'experimental' carries the connotation of the word 'mental'. Thus it cannot be dismissed as mere *experimenting* or *experimentation*; something is *experimental* if it is such in terms of its *mental image*. But even if sound communicates in the moment it is perceived, *what* it communicates (the *image*) can and should be separable.

The relevant 'problem' regarding experimentality is not simply one of material nature, and thus it is definitely not disposable. It is, rather, in an obscure sense, 'social-mental'; it is inevitably related to the *transitivity* of the musical experience, as player, listener or mere communicator. Like transitivity of verbs in language – 'sleep' is not transitive, but 'do' and 'throw' are. 'Throw' can also be used without a direct object. But music can *not* be used without a direct object without losing its functionality. The *topic* of music, the *field* of thinking and un-thinking, of emotions and rhetorical mechanisms are inseparable in practice from the actual listening, but largely overlap with it. It is a relationship (conscious or unconscious) between humanised entities: it is an *I-You* relationship.

Experimental music is also actualised by the dialectic between its relative 'familiarity' and its 'unfamiliarity'. The two concepts express funda-

mental aspects of human self-understanding. The significance of *being familiar* has to do with the inherent tensions of the *I*-subject, tensions that we experience in relation to ourselves and to environmental effects; but it can also mean to be compatible with the social sphere.

The music-economist Jacques Attali claimed that “it is no coincidence that [Luigi] Russolo wrote his “The Art of Noises” in 1913; that noise entered music and industry entered painting just before the outbursts and wars of the twentieth century, before the rise of social noise”.¹ If this is true, then pioneer futurist Russolo never did represent *experimental music* in any meaningful sense for us. For him it served as *zeitgeist* speculation and propaganda, *not* as an example of human alienation, or a simple counterweight – the transitivity goes *I-This*, not *I-You*. Thus Russolo never became one of those who exhausted human spirit to the point of accepting mental or logical inconsistencies (although he probably wished he would be).

One less simple approach to these problems is to look at how they work in practice, in the field of music comprehension – in musical genres as we know them without having to think. In the genre ‘classical’ we find problems of experimental transitivity that are naturally apparent primarily in ‘contemporary music’. The classics succeeding the classics, the two-faced crescendos of Mahler and Debussy leading towards the hermetic niches of the ‘hyper-modern’. The most recognisable feature of human life – namely the human *being* – seems here departed and pale in comparison with the stories and emotions of high Romanticism. Where music is concerned, it can be claimed that new art is bound to be remote even *before* the communication process is finished. It does not simply expel the human aspect from ‘serious music’, but interprets human existence as something slightly different: “La deshumanización del arte”, as historian José Ortega y Gasset branded it.

Jacob Taubes, a Jewish historian/theologian, has further claimed that the rise of experimental art and music in the 20th century was

a rebirth of ancient Gnosticism, of the notion of an evil creator, in which the redeeming God remains totally absent from the business of his/her world. This viewpoint is not far-fetched with regard to our issue, since several of the canonised protagonists of avant-garde music (Genesis P-Orridge, Sun Ra, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Diamanda Galás, Coil) have established their vital foundations in a sonic realm of 'Gnosis': pre-Christian mystics and post-Christian humanism. For an audience that is not too inclined to experimentation and non-sense, the profiles of atonal avant-garde composers are equal to this alien God, the personified divinity that we are *told* is good but whose omnipotent goodness we cannot reach unless we think of ourselves as stretching towards it – unless we accept Evil as the product of a misanthropic and devilish Creator, as something non-experimental.

'Contemporary music' seems to be music without genre obligations, and without organic *breaks* or friction with its circumstances. The hand that rocks the cradle has a face – it is still a *You*, yet a neutralized one; and it leaves few openings for ambiguity, only (re)-presents human behaviour as something *non-familiar*, and atonality and asymmetry as structures ruling everyday private life.

Things are quite different when it comes to the common concepts of jazz and rock. Since these are actual genres in the commercial sense, born of mass media and hyper-modern social dynamics, their experimentation has to emerge from a continuously ongoing break with conventions, whilst simultaneously having to establish a new convention. One has a set of definitions and rules to describe or deconstruct these concepts, and longs to say "we would also like to use them in *our* own non-restricted way". The point of departure of experimentality is *tradition*, like the classical one, but as popular music it has to be *proclaimed*.

This is how the word 'jazz' was classified by history. It does not help if people of today ascribe an experimental quality to the crackle of

Jelly Roll Morton's master tapes but it helped in the 1950s when Symphony Sid yelled about "something new in modern music", as Charlie Parker set Birdland, New York on fire, and when he yelled the same at Miles Davis' *Birth of the Cool* a decade later.

Further, Ornette Coleman proved the value of extending, to revolutionary heights, the freedom of cross-cultured individuals. His early classics still sound melodic, but back in those days they marked a combination of energy and post-harmony camouflaged as a purer, stricter *novelty*. His music was a variant of Russolo, but with an extra eye (*I*) in the forehead, pointing inwards with self-discipline. *The Shape of Jazz to Come* and *Something Else!!!!* were statements of new blackness within a whitened black tradition. 'The Great, Black Music' was of liberating purpose and therefore functioned also as a new religion; it still feels essentially dynamic in its *relation* to experimental mindsets. It also placed a new humanistic emphasis on (its own) experimental outspokenness. The infinite mantras of John Coltrane and Albert Ayler were experimental due to their spiritual humbleness, their urge to seek high truth with the help of simple brass and wood. The esotericism of Pharoah Sanders and Sun Ra was even stronger - moving totally beyond its contemporariness, back to the roots or forward into chaotic 'sci-fidelity'. This is music for the New Man, for all eternity, as opposed to Russolo's transient cars and machine ages.

From the 1950/60s onwards jazz as 'art music' gradually locked itself inside the same shell as 'classical', coincidentally, with the same possible *variation*: any sound can be jazz, any musical tradition or invention can mingle with the blue notes or even make them change to green or red. Not only in the ears - much more in the eyes and mouths - of generations for which no genre concept can be sincerely explained, 'jazz' can mean literally anything, and the avant-garde of it cannot work as it once did. Only for a really conservative audience does it ever amount to a big deal if the music they are about to hear is experimental or not. The European vein

of improvised music has of course been an important factor in this neutralising process. To compress the illustrative arguments, one could say that the significance of making a piece of music that consists entirely of silence is more relevant in the case of improvisation than it is for composed music.

The notion of *rock* in this manner is far less fixed. Since its point of departure is a scream for youth and primitivism, it is also the possible starting point for any emancipatory interpretation of experimental music. The faces of today's avant rock have roots going back to the 1950s, a decade airy as a castle, built on broadcastable power blues. On the other hand, there was never anything explicitly *new* about The Velvet Underground, The Nice, Faust, Suicide or Throbbing Gristle. What they all did was grope back to the infantilism or subtlety of days gone by (California fun and Fordist factories), spending their present time with rockabilly, Oedipus-dreams and post-Dada. Meanwhile counter-punks Wire and The Fall were dirtying their hands in the vases of the 'prole art threat' (and they came admirably close to revolution).

As for more recent noise-dominated expressions, this works essentially as rock without memory, 'heavy rock without beats'. And even when not presented as rock, it has got rock inside as a liberating force, and electronic meta-sound as a 'physically alienating outside force' (which makes every frank quote regarding 'rock'n'roll' seem embarrassingly outdated). For sure, a really major part of the superficial 'avant-garde' music made since the late 1970s has been enhanced by a post-modern *rock* sensibility – a sensibility quite contrary to the pre-modern ornate-mystique of the psychedelic and 'progressive' rock from the preceding decades.

Rock is thus also the pulse of what is dealt with in between categories, because the liberty of music – the freedom to conceptualise ones own piece (peace) of sound and make it art or anti-art, explain it intellectually or *beat*-wise, experiment or stubbornly *not* experi-

ment – is, well, more a rock thing than a jazz thing. Rock as activity can be reactionary, but rock as communication *is* progressive: transitive in spirit, or an expression of freedom *from* something. Modern rock music – from Japanese noise-core to The White Stripes – is open to an experimentality which is tied both to Gnostic obscurity and mere entertainment. “Jazz is inevitably experimental, rock is inevitably un-experimental” – a smart statement, but totally incorrect when enlightened by the dynamics of popular music.

Let us then check out a field totally ‘beyond’ genre control: ethnic music, or folk music – everyday music for which geographical origins are even more important than they are for Seattle Rock or Bergen Pop; complex as usual within a globalised culture perspective. For many people in the world, it will feel relatively unnatural, even *unfamiliar*, to practice the classic folk culture of one’s own nation. But when we seek to understand music ‘other than’ our own, we have to approach it from this angle. On listening to chants and strings from Tibetan, Transylvanian and Sámi fields, we regard them as both an output and input of experimental thinking. And the transitivity gets *filtered* through the (post)modern notion that all cultures are equally unique and interdependent, towards a hidden significance for our times; earthliness and spirituality *merged into one*.

To make this more difficult than it is, I am not talking about ‘world music’. Expressions of world music are variants of jazz and rock, different tools for worshippers of globality and relativism as technological imperialism. By comparison a piece of *ethnic music* will be labelled with quality/non-quality according to something else: a human-metaphysical scale, which simultaneously measures and indirectly experiences all the nuances of *being alive*. Most people will not describe this as ‘experimental’ (when they hear it), and certainly many are unlikely to experience it as such. A composed pop song, or a neatly cut piece of avant-garde improv-noise, is still regarded as *more* open to manipulation than a Polynesian rain dance.

If we sit down and analyse actual phenomena, no *thing* seems more real than any other. But the perception lives on. What could be said to inherit the transitivity of ethnic music into pop music is not the 'world' genre, but types of music that can still be recognised as organically ethnic. Hip hop, for instance, used to be all black, but has grown demographically whiter. It has managed to be worshipped anywhere – in cultures where punk guitars and industrial beats are not moving *smoothly* enough, rather too *bourgeois*. There hip hop works as the ultimate DIY expression; along with *rap*, its lyrical language. Even so, it balances brilliantly on the borderline of the avant-garde. A performer like Missy Elliot is as such both a front-runner in experimental music and a commercial, slick entertainer.

With ethnic music we turn a modern eye on lifelines outside modernity – an astronomical eye on anthropological phenomena. The music of peoples and 'other-worldly' (in contrast to 'non-worldly') classical traditions offer everyday expressions of archaic ideals, humour, and *worship*. It is experimental almost without being music. If Russolo had been a pre-Renaissance peasant, his socio-electric 'experiments' would suggest something innocent and exotic – maximum *freedom*, minimum music.

Preferably we go for maximum freedom *and* music. When put together, these two forces bring out meaningfulness without limits, under shining concepts, most notably *politics* and *sound*, that have been absent in this text. Needless to say, these are music's essential *alpha* and metaphysical *omega* – still, for breathing under tables and in smell-less air, music is dependent on certain powers, the human qualities of timeless movement and communication. 'Who' is moving, and 'why' it flows, belong to a different discussion – but experimental music will instantly show you *how*.

Footnotes

¹ Jacques Attali – *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis, 1997), p. 16

THE LOUD CHEF

Interview with Lasse Marhaug

Sindre Andersen

Lasse Marhaug (born 1974) is one of the principal figures in Norwegian experimental music. He makes graphical, tone-deaf noise music, but generally he's quite flexible, showing up everywhere, and since his conceptual core is more like sparkling water than Coca Cola, one doesn't get sick of him. One just wants more.

Marhaug has made hundreds of tapes and records since he started out as a northern teenager in the late 1980s. He was/is a member of Origami Replika, Jazzkammer, DEL and Ken Vandermark's Territory Band, and his administrative credits include the label Jazzassin Records and the annual All Ears festival in Oslo. He was nominated for Spellemannsprisen 2004 (the Norwegian Grammy Award) in the category Electronica/Contemporary music for the album *The Shape of Rock to Come*.

The conversations took place in Oslo in May 2005.

Sindre Andersen: What does 'experimental' mean to you?

Lasse Marhaug: A lot of people working with experimental music are extremely locked into what they are doing. They find 'their niche', and then they stay there forever.

SA: And then it's not so experimental anymore?

LM: No, because you actually have to do the 'experimenting', try out new things, test...

SA: Is that what you are doing?

LM: I don't know. To a certain degree I am doing actual experiments – for example the project Two Limited that I did with Tom Hovinbøle¹. There I played a one-stringed violin – an instrument I'd never played before. And we were totally acoustic – which I'd never been before... We also experimented with the recording situation; outdoors, on the street, in stairwells, etc. We did it once every month in 2001, and it felt like a genuinely experimental project. We had *no idea* how it would end up sounding. The solo stuff I'm doing nowadays, however, doesn't really feel experimental. I'm pretty much in control of what I'm doing. But I think that whatever kind of music you are involved in, you have a wish to develop yourself in some way or other. And that is per se experimental – but it's also vague.

SA: It depends on who is listening – the player or the lone listener.

LM: Yes, for people who own hundreds of noise/electronica records, my stuff gives them nothing 'new' – but it's totally different for people who have got only country music on their shelves...

SA: But how do you explain it to people who are close to you who don't *get* the music – your parents for instance?

LM: I say I'm doing 'strange music'. For most people it is like that; the music sounds unusual, but not dangerous. 'Strange' is a disarming concept, not scary, not 'smart'. One can get used to it.

SA: But even experienced listeners will have problems picking out what is 'strange' in your music. It may actually work negatively, since a lot of laptop music sounds pretty standardized.

LM: Computer music is getting boring these days. You can do so much with a computer – and then so many people end up doing so little! What was meant to be a means of deconstructing music has ended up building a new standard form – as *reconstructing*. You get all these traditional random and glitch soundscapes – people are too easily satisfied with what they produce on a laptop! It's OK with a childish fascination, of course. But I usually don't go to those kinds of concerts.

SA: But you have been using a laptop yourself all the time, and you'll keep on using it...

LM: Because I also observe this widespread anti-laptop attitude, where people just say "Boring boring, no fun to watch the concerts". When I hear that, I really get keen to use the laptop again. One should not be absolutist in any direction. It should also be allowed just to sit and press PLAY on a CD-player.

SA: Absolutely. I'm also sick of those kinds of counter-arguments... It's not a problem in itself to have full playback on stage. But it's extremely easy to use this 'non-genuine' thing against performing musicians.

LM: Jazz and rock have set the standards for what is genuine in music performance. But are those standards really the ones that we need, necessarily?

SA: Music itself, traditionally, has to do with being genuine. If you watch a concert from an art or performance perspective, you will judge it differently. But you have no plans to quit your laptop?

LM: As you may know I already use a lot of other stuff. On my recent tours in New Zealand and Japan, I didn't take my computer at all. In Jazzkammer I've stopped using it, and made us into a guitar duo! John Hegre, my jazz partner, buys guitars that he destroys, and uses the remains as instruments, with an amp made from cases for knives and scissors. He has also built a guitar for me, consisting of only pick-up and strings. Now we will never again be invited to super-boring laptop electronica festivals! But our next album will be metal. We've just been recording in Bergen, with Jørgen 'Sir Dupermann' Træen in his studio, and some instrumentalists.

SA: A pure studio project?

LM: Yes, but we'll maybe try it out live. It will not be smart, conventionalized metal – well, though it is in a way conventionalized. We gave instructions to the musicians, and tuned in the perfect drum sound. John and Jørgen play instruments – and I play bass on one track...

SA: You certainly release a lot. Do you ever get dissatisfied with the stuff you do?

LM: Quite often.

SA: ...and you do not release everything you record?

LM: No, not at all. Nobody believes this, because I release so much. But it's also that I work a whole lot, and my electronic way of making music makes it all easier than for a lot of others to just sit down and create. And I throw a lot away. I usually don't do recordings of my concerts, in contrast to a lot of free improvisers. Concerts I

think should take place there and then, and anyway it feels totally different afterwards.

SA: Yes, some people seem to have it almost as a principle just to play and play and record, and to release everything they make.

LM: And I must honestly say that I think a lot of musicians release way too much. That's maybe unfair to say. But as for myself I have a strict quality control. Sometimes I stop in the middle of a process and delete everything. All finished work is good work, usually. But when I do smaller release formats, like tapes or CD-Rs, the situation is more open for trying unfinished stuff.

SA: So you have a higher threshold when you do big album releases?

LM: Well, that's also wrong to say. I believe that something that is done intuitively, fast or even sloppily can have a quality for precisely that reason... This is something I experience when I listen to other people's superficial recordings, old noise tapes etc. – that stuff often sounds much better than what the same people have put lots of effort into.

SA: But it's also an interesting problem, because it leaves us open to think, "Why bother spending all this time, anyway?" and it makes it more difficult to approach a definition of what actually makes good music good.

LM: Yes, but it may simply be that, when people sit too long with their music, it all just cooks away, the freshness vanishes. Take most good rock bands; they last one or two albums, and then they disband. The basic, raw chemistry disappears because one starts to think too much about it, gets too many opinions about it. So, I definitely cannot say that the stuff I spend one month – or one year – on is worth more than raw ideas put together in ten minutes.

SA: But when you actually spend lots of time on things, do you have – when you start – a concrete idea about how it will end up sounding, and how long it will take?

LM: Definitely – and what I spend most time on is simply walking around and thinking out from these basic ideas. How I want this particular record to sound, in contrast to the former... Like my two last solo CDs² they kind of work as mutual contrasts; one is thoughtfully glitchy, one noisy. When I start putting things together, things change of course. The recording itself doesn't last long – but listening, editing, re-doing afterwards, is what takes time. I often let things just rest for a while. I'm continually collecting sound material, so sometimes old things fit. But at some point one just has to put one's foot down and say, "Finished!" I have no delusions of perfection. I think the reason why I get to do so much is that I feel very comfortable with my own decisions, with being finished and satisfied with something. It's always been like that actually; it hasn't grown, rather the opposite, I'm maybe a little more self-critical now.

SA: But do you listen a lot to your own releases?

LM: No. I listen through a record or a track once when it's finished, just to make sure that the CD or vinyl pressing is good; and then I will not listen to it for years. I do not sit and quiver and pat myself on the shoulder, or build up some 'career idea' in my head. Regarding the past, I just trust my gut feeling.

SA: I remember I told you once before about this listening competition at NRK P2 [Norwegian national radio], where they played a Jazzkammer track along with a lot of contemporary classical music, and experts were supposed to guess the composer of it. Even though you're a member of the Norwegian Composers Society, none of the participants could guess it was you – but I remember that you said later you wouldn't even have recognised it yourself...?

LM: Yeah, but that's really true!

SA: What can we learn from that? In a sense one can say that a lot of your music sounds essentially similar, but that never means it's useless...

LM: I also have a really huge catalogue of recordings. Ordinary academic composers are maybe expected to remember their own works, but they spend most time on this mid-part I mentioned – putting things together and so on. Also, for a lot of my projects – both performances and releases – the initiative doesn't come from me. I never send out demos, or ask people, "Would you be interested in releasing this?" But, fortunately I get asked very often.

SA: But I suppose you were once at that stage, where you pushed the stuff you did when you were younger?

LM: Yes, earlier. But never that much. I never wanted to bother people with my activities, so in the end I started my own record label³. The smaller labels should really feel free not to take every bloody demo tape into account.

SA: Something I find interesting is, when trying to explain in simple terms what distinguishes noise from ordinary music, I've ended up by referring to the memory of it, outside the listening situation. Usually you don't remember noise. Music that is melody based can possibly be translated into humming, similar to folk music that's delivered and interpreted without paying attention to the original. Noise is more 'there and then'; you can remember the dramaturgy of certain tracks, but you cannot interpret it your own way, without presenting the exact sounds.

LM: I have problems remembering classical music. Even if it's very melodic, I only keep the general mood inside me, as with noise. Or black metal, or avant-garde hip hop – which is not really catchy either.

It's like a good meal; you don't walk around with the taste in your mouth, only with the feeling.

SA: You've also said before that the process of making music and making food is quite similar?

LM: Yes, also the enjoyment, the appeal for their respective senses. It's simple and banal, but I think there is some truth in it. You take some different ingredients that don't really fit together as they are, and then you start a mystical process – cooking, frying, fermentation – and it changes, into something really homogeneous.

SA: It is like that in music also, something that you let happen, that you really don't have control over. If that does not occur, it usually means that it's bad.

LM: You've got control, but there is still a process going on somewhere.

SA: And it changes your expectations towards the sound.

LM: But then one has to ask, what kind of food fits to the music I'm doing. I don't think it's very fine food, it is probably very simple. I remember Fenriz, from the black metal group Darkthrone, once said that all those new, pompous black metal bands were 'cream cake', while the raw, basic sound of the old school was 'bread'. That means you cannot have cream cake every day you also need bread. I think that was a nice metaphor.

SA: But cake is supposed to be something tasty. I suppose he doesn't enjoy this creamy Dimmu Borgir stuff?!

LM: I guess he's more the bread type.

SA: If you mean by cream cake something rich and over-ornamented, then maybe...

LM: Yes, it's tasty every now and then. But mostly you need bread. I'm not sure about my own music. Jazzkammer had this album called *Pancakes...*

SA: Pancake might be an OK metaphor. Something simple, made from the bottom; not prefab, but made from few elements.

LM: Probably some pastry. Good bread or something. Waffles.

SA: Bread is what you need every day to function, while waffles are more for the weekend.

LM: Fruit salad! That's something you don't need every day – but if you eat it often, it's very refreshing, and healthy.

SA: It depends on how one thinks of health in this context...

LM: I think noise is good for you...

SA: Yes, but don't you think it is something that one usually has to concentrate on a little more than other types of music, in the actual listening situation?

LM: I often have noise music on in the background, while working on other things.

SA: Yes of course, it might fit – if it's not too much different sorts of information in the soundscape.

LM: Harsh Japanese noise, Incapacitants and Hijokaidan – that's perfect background music.

SA: Yes, stuff which is very monotonous can often be used meditatively.

LM: Or like a pet. A cat or something. It's nice just to have it there. I think it was a review of this *Pancakes* album, which compared it to a cat. That was a nice comparison.

SA: But *Pancakes* is extremely lush and nuanced. For me it is a record that really requires focused listening!

LM: Yes, it is definitely a listening record, that's true. A lot of people regard it as Jazzkammer's 'ambient' album, but it is actually very consciously composed, none of the tracks lasts longer than necessary. We tried to have it on in the background, but it didn't work.

SA: No, of course it doesn't.

LM: It's one of my most demanding records.

SA: And if you stare a cat in the eyes, it usually gets aggressive.

LM: Yes, cats pay most attention to people who are obviously afraid of them.

SA: It's like that with noise music as well? I mean, to have it on in the background can be a sort of 'inviting context' to people who are sceptical.

LM: In any case, I try to make inviting music. I want it to be kind of catchy and simple. In general I think people take me too seriously. It is important, what I'm doing, but it is taken too seriously. There's a lot of humour in it that people don't really get. And that's a general problem for all kinds of contemporary music, noise, electronica... it's just so serious, so devout. Relax, it's only music! But instead it all gets very heavy, suddenly very sad and grave.

SA: It makes me think about when I first started to get interested in that kind of music. I remember thinking "this stuff has to be some-

thing unlike everything else, and the people doing noise music have to be... not mystic or mysterious, they just have to have a different attitude towards music, towards life in general. Because this music needs to consist of a maximum of strangeness!" But very soon I found out that of course it is not like this – well, for many people it might be, but I think it can work the opposite way as well. I believe it's not at all about jumping from *this* to *that*, but that you can understand *this* better if you take *that* into account, and know it from the inside.

LM: In general, I think experimental music is a field where one should be allowed to play and try out things. Like children actually learn from playing – well, it's as simple as that.

SA: It's easy to think, for us, automatically that what we call 'ordinary music' is just fun and jokes, while experimental music is serious and meaningful. But in fact it is the opposite.

LM: Exactly. I mean, all those music and reality TV shows; that's what serious means to me. There are absurd amounts of money involved. You're not allowed to play games there. But in the music I'm doing there is no business, no careering. We don't take it seriously – but that doesn't mean we take it unseriously.

SA: You used to work as a graphic designer?

LM: I still do. I used to have a solid job, but now it's more for earning some money. Now I dispose of my own time, which is good. I don't have the ambition to earn a lot from music. It has to be fun. If I end up doing cheap film music in ten years just for money, then please tell me.

SA: But, if you ended up in a situation where you couldn't do music any more?

LM: Then I would start doing something else.

SA: But would you feel it as a huge loss?

LM: No – but I definitely have a need to be doing something. I see this also with other people, who do lots of different things. People with surplus energy, who are naturally speedy. And anyway, I have serious problems sitting still. I don't do this as a way of working with my demons. When I'm stressed or unhappy, I'm not very creative either, and I know few others who are. Creativity can have a preventive effect, towards negative emotions, but it has to spring from this surplus. Anyway, I feel I'm living on borrowed time. So if it hadn't been music, something else would've been there. Captain Beefheart quit rock and started painting – it's really not that dramatic. You finish with one thing and start with something else. I'm sure I could have quit music at any time, and started drawing, or just doing design, or painting, or sculpture, whatever. I've been playing with the thought of just stopping making music.

SA: Really?

LM: Well, not seriously. But I've been thinking now while I'm so active, just to quit totally and start doing something else, get the good feeling of starting from the bottom again. But, to be really serious, why should I quit, now when it's going so well? As a kid I never wanted to do music. I only wanted to play with tape recorders. But now I'm making a metal album without having ever learnt to master a musical instrument. So I ended up with music, sort of.

Footnotes

- ¹ Film director of, among other things, the documentary *NorNoise*
- ² *Nothing but Sound from Now On* (2001) and *The Shape of Rock to Come* (2004)
- ³ Tidal Wave Recycling (tape label) was started in 1995, Jazzassin Records in 1996

LIVE EXPERIMENTS

Experimental music and the stage

Are Mokkelbost

I won't embark on the difficult task of defining the term 'experimental' or how to categorize music accordingly. Instead I will address the way this uncategorizable music is performed. This is not *The Complete Guide to Experimental Music and the Stage, Vol. 1*. Rather it is my own highly subjective attempt at describing some tendencies I have come across while looking into music I'm interested in, when playing concerts with my own bands, by recommendation or pure fluke. My main concern is therefore to let you in on this activity too, in case you haven't yet heard such music.

Underground for all

Experimental music is no longer as inaccessible as it once was. The underground has to strive hard to be left alone in the dark, since the market is relentlessly seeking new, 'authentic' sub-cultures and undiscovered geniuses. There is simply not enough underground to go around, and what were radical musical ideas decades ago have

spread, mutated and floated to the surface, and are being absorbed by both a wider public and musicians worldwide. Much the same goes for the experimental music scene as well. The music-buying public seems to want more of the unusual and the difficult, maybe broken down into digestible bits; but still, they are hungry.

Magazines such as *The Wire*, *Sonic*, *XL8R*, *Groove*, *Sound Projector* and *Bananafish*, and websites like Pitchfork Media, Epitonic, All Music Guide or the Norwegian Ballade, constitute a platform where a wide range of music is discussed. These publications have helped to educate the public about all kinds of music that is hard to define. It may be overly optimistic, but I would say there has never been greater interest in difficult music than is now the case. In fact, it is hard to imagine music that would be outrageous or unacceptable nowadays. Every conceivable style is neatly disassembled, categorized and contextualized, be it loud or soft, difficult or accessible, DIY or pop. This, combined with the fact that it has become dramatically easier to get hold of the music itself, through cheaper records, on-line shops and MP3 technology, makes for a music revolution.

I think this is truly wonderful. I don't like having to track down a copy of a mere 30 silk-screened 7-inch vinyls, individually signed and decorated by some unknown band from the depths of the US Midwest. I want to listen to their music NOW so that I can make up my mind about it and move on to other things. Or, I want to download their solo projects. Herein lies the magic; to be able to tap into the vast reservoir of music in such a non-linear and immediate way. The information is there, and if you have ever searched for a song by name at Limewire, Napster, Kazaa, Piratbay, Hypertorrent or other file-sharing sites, only to find the original track from the 1960s you didn't even know existed, maybe you know what I mean.

This growing interest in experimental music has consequently resulted in large numbers of experimental bands taking to the road, helped by easy-to-transport laptop technology and compact, elec-

tronic instruments. Booking is easier than ever. There are venues for most music in most towns, from small stages that will hire out a space for single events to bigger venues for all kinds of experimental music. So, has the boom in experimental music led to a similar boom in performance? Have the new possibilities in music making led to a broadening of the stage ritual? It is hard to tell. Maybe the sheer number of concerts has accustomed concert-goers to all kinds of spectacle. Or maybe it is really happening, amid all the noise of the thousands of bands there are around.

Two camps in the wilderness

Roughly speaking one can talk of two different approaches within the experimental scene, two camps with essentially different approaches when it comes to music making and hence the performance thereof. Fortunately, the division is not as clear as all that, and I might even be totally off the mark, but a few major generalizations may help in the process of clarifying the experimental landscape. Ok, so on one side there is 'pure' computer music, a non-referential formal aesthetics that leans heavily on modernist ideas about form above content. On the other side is the 'dirty' genre-mixing music, with a referential and more contextual aesthetics, post-modern music if you wish. The former includes primarily genres such as electro-acoustic music, noise, electronica, onkyo and even techno, while the latter includes genres such as avant rock, experimental hip hop, breakcore and so on.

As far as performance goes, I will make the same generalization. Generally speaking Camp 1 focuses on formal qualities in the music rather than the performance, while Camp 2 embraces the physical performance with its theatrical, mythical and ritual aspects.

With this as my rocky foundation, I will take a look at different approaches within each camp.

CAMP 1 - LIVE NUMBERS

So much has happened in the electronic music scene over the past decade, it's a revolution really. The rapid evolution of computer technology and software, the availability due to low prices, access to hacked programs and shareware, all add up to an immense leap forward. It has granted the general public direct access to sound and its most basic parameters, plus a vast number of tools for generating, altering and organizing sound. Such possibilities, which were formerly reserved for a trained elite of composers with a soft spot for numbers and lab coats, has opened up music making at the most basic level and spawned a buzzing activity throughout the genre spectrum.

Electronic music nowadays is inseparably connected with laptop music. The laptop is the omnipresent tool of the modern musician, and it is the blessing and the curse of electronic music today. The curse lies in what it has done to the performance. At concerts, pale, blue-tinted faces peek up from behind LCD screens, staring into their crystal balls, making secret choices with their index finger and pouring out abstract sounds by the ton.

For a while laptop music drew new, curious crowds to the venues. It seemed such a radically new way of making music, and the laptop was such an exclusive, futuristic object to gaze at. We had passed the future mark of 2001 for sure. But now the novelty factor has worn off, and the electronic music scene is struggling to make sense of itself in the live format. The problem is: the musical process is internalized within the computer and removed from view, leaving the audience with few routes of access to the music other than the musician in person or simply the sound itself.

Sound phenomenology

So, what strategies are used to activate this music and present it live? At the extreme end of the electronic music scene the newly acquired superpower of the computer is a way to grab everyone's attention, by producing very physical sounds that no one can escape. Although as performers these musicians are often on the same level as game show contenders, their music is essentially different in the live situation from what it is when recorded. With the computer comes easy access to the maximum parameters of sound; sub-bass, high frequencies, the click (a sound waveform cut clean without gradual descent, creating a popping effect in the speaker itself), the glitch (warped digitalized sound) and white noise. Run this through a powerful PA and a physical experience is unavoidable.

Merzbow, the Japanese one-man institution of noise, has been a key figure when it comes to noise as a physical experience. Starting out with tapes, cracked electronics and a complex set up of guitar effect pedals connected in feedback chains, together with homemade noise-guitars, and moving on later – regrettably – to the laptop, Merzbow has spearheaded the Japanese noise assault on the world from the late 1970s and until today. Through an immense mass of releases and concerts (he released a 50 CD Box some years ago), he has blown speaker systems and eardrums worldwide.

Drawing direct parallels between noise and pain, he has in both music and writing explored the sensory relationship between noise music and SM. He has taken this exploration to the point of working on films with Japanese bondage masters, writing extensively on the subject and playing live at SM events.

Another profiled laptop noisemaker of today, and Merzbow collaborator, is Russell Haswell. Having claimed to have no musical objectives whatsoever but a burning desire to clear any room he performs

in, his agenda is clear. The goal is to seek out uncharted territories of sound in order to achieve a new anti-aesthetics, something not yet absorbed by any genre or market. It is a hard road to walk, and it seems Haswell is backing off a little on his no-compromise ethic, collaborating more with bands and artists outside the noise scene.

The Japanese noise scene spawned similar scenes in the US and Europe in the 1990s, and in the past few years Norwegian noise has become a term of its own in the experimental music press. In Norway the ambassadors of noise are Lasse Marhaug and his Jazzkammer duo with John Hegre, along with Fe-mail's Maja Ratkje and Hild Sofie Tafjord, Tore H Bøe and the Origami collective, Ryfylke and many more. It is hard to divide the international noise scene into different compartments based on geography, but still I would contend that Norway represents a more sober kind of noise, while the Japanese scene is far more physical, also on stage. Like Masonna, who manages to tear the stage apart and crush his instruments in 30 seconds flat.

Another consequence of the strict Japanese ethic is the small but active onkyo music scene, which translates into something like small, non-musical sounds or ambience. Using silence, pre-installed sine waves in samplers, turntables without records, mixer feedback loops and other kinds of stripped down equipment, they have formed a new aesthetics that incorporates ideas from both early minimalism and their experience in maximalist noise groups such as Ground Zero, Altered States etc. A revitalized John Cage meets contemporary technology and a syncretistic approach; onkyo music is all about listening, shifting between maximum parameters of sound with a subtle touch.

Lights out!

Loud music can easily become flat and undynamic once the levels are in the red. It is not unusual for people to fall asleep at ear-wreck-

ing volumes and to wake up once the silence returns. The contrast between the immobile musician and the extreme noise can be striking at first, like a terrorist bomber setting off explosives at the touch of his fingertips. But it is a limited approach and other measures are needed to engage an audience.

A common solution is simply to turn off the lights and play in the dark, visually removing the stage. It is super simple but if the music has enough to offer it really can be enough to do the trick. It certainly alleviates the unbearable boredom of watching someone who insists on standing in front of an audience with nothing more to offer than the occasional knob twist. A musician without an instrument, an actor on a break, a composer with stage fright; it's hell to witness.

Francisco López has taken the lights-out approach to its logical conclusion, performing just as often in theatres as in concert venues, handing out blindfolds and placing himself behind the audience. Or, seating the audience in a circle facing outwards, speakers hidden along the walls behind black molton fabric. López usually introduces his performances in person, explaining his intentions and encouraging people to focus on the listening experience rather than the performance. Still, his concerts are ultimately theatrical; the collective blindfolding, the slow, dramatic crescendos from soft to fierce sounds, abrupt stops and López' own loud breathing.

Campfire

Another solution is to fix the eyes of the audience on something other than the performer, a neutral focal point for contemplative listening. It is storytelling time and the tribe is gathered around the campfire, the hippies around the lava lamp and the experimental crowd around the video projection. Music has the ability to streamline the reading of the most disconnected series of images, and any video projection

will create some kind of dialogue with the music. The instant effect is tempting and clichés such as footage of the sea, cityscapes or road trips have already been used ad nauseam. There are literally thousands, I kid you not, of experimental video backdrops that use such stuff, and even more that use slow motion.

In Norway Biosphere's Geir Jenssen started at an early stage making videos to accompany his concerts, later collaborating extensively with other video artists. Like in his music, Geir Jenssen uses layers of loops or other circular forms to invoke a feeling of slowly evolving patterns and time shifts. Having stayed faithful to this format from the outset, his consistency has started to pay off, combining simplicity with smart image processing. The result is a video backdrop that is secondary to the music but still complex.

The balance between video and music is difficult, since moving images evoke narratives and a video projection easily ends up overriding the music. If the audience sense too much of a narrative, a non-linear video will soon fall short. Consequently, it can be effective to reduce the narrative still further to a strictly formal relationship between sound and image. Pan Sonic have been consistent in their use of the oscilloscope projection in their concerts. Displaying the amplitude of the frequencies played, this vintage instrument consolidates the stern scientific aesthetics of the Finnish duo, and the direct relationship between sound and image is as blunt as the sound of their sub-bass frequencies, clicks and Russian drum machines. Carsten Nicolai is one of many who use the same translation of sound into image, only with a digital aesthetics.

Mego, an Austrian label of electronic music, has fertilized this formal relationship between sound and image as well. Having also released videos they try to marry the laptop music and laptop video scene. The aesthetics is heavily rooted in the possibilities of the software, letting sound parameters affect visual parameters in innumerable ways. What is peculiar though is how often the result comes out

as something resembling low-resolution versions of experimental films from the 1960s, with their elementary forms and their black and white aesthetics. Several notches more complex and at the very forefront of motion graphics development is Alexander Rutterford, who has made a technically remarkable video for Autechre's "Gantz Graf" song, released as a video track on the album of the same name. This video alone has demoralized hordes of motion graphic designers with its high tempo animation of a three-dimensional structure, every bit of music visually transformed into a physical change in the structure. The video depicts something like a disintegrating and fiercely active sparkplug spinning around at high speed. It establishes a good match between the elements of music and video, giving both a highly formal and seductive edge. This kind of 3D animation with sound effects is becoming more common, and is used extensively in commercials and on MTV. Hopefully the development of more powerful computers will make this more common in live settings as well.

For those who want to make live video on stage but who only have a crappy, old computer, collectives such as Paperrad, Dear Raindrop and Beige should be of great inspiration. With low resolution animations, vector-based graphics, home video tapes and hacked Nintendos, they manage to produce awe-inspiring work with simple means. They are professional amateurs who indulge in the aesthetics that comes with the tools, cultivating web, amateur art and psychedelic cartoon graphics.

Sequenced lights

At every concert, lighting defines the premises of how to see the stage and the performer. Usually larger scale bands have their own lighting technician, maybe even their own stacks of lamps, but by and large very few bands control this part of their performance. After years of playing concerts and being dissatisfied with poor lighting techni-

cians, I decided to take control of this with my solo project, Single Unit. I tracked down a MIDI-to-light converter box, which allows me to program lighting using regular music programs. Now I can hook up whatever lamps I find at the venue, and be sure they will all blink and fade the same way every night. It is the future, I tell you!

Rock stars vs. nerds

The stage presence of rock and jazz is a haunting ghost in the laptop scene. There is a constant expectation to see the hard working musician, dripping with sweat and making acrobatic moves. The audience wants to see a physical relationship between music and musician, and while the music can certainly have the power and the swing, the musical processes lie within the computer and seldom find release on stage in a more physical form.

One strategy is to move the musical process out of the computer through various interfaces, allocating sound parameters to external instruments. These types of interfaces are rapidly growing in number and are crucial to an intuitive and effective way of playing software instruments. Even though what goes on can still be a mystery, at least it demonstrates to the audience that *something* is going on. Now the keyboard is no longer merely a keyboard, it is hooked up to complex systems inside colourful software, and playing it is like rubbing Aladdin's lamp. Just like the important presence of a bass player, who in all honesty has a somewhat simple job, the direct relationship between body and music is crucial. More and more laptop musicians utilize controllers and external instruments to push for a stronger live presence and virtuosity, often reworking their music differently every night.

The group Sensorband live up to their name by hooking themselves up to an arsenal of gadgets and sensor technology, every sound in the music triggered by something on stage. The associations reach

back to Jean Michel Jarre's light beam synthesizer of the 1980s; Jarre was similar in finding over-the-top ways of playing simple tones from the future. Less technical but a hundred times more virtuosic is Jamie Lidell, who fearlessly breeds soul (!) with live electronics. Armed with a microphone, laptop, live sampler and effects, he generates beats, chants solo lines and verses, jamming from here to oblivion. By taking technology back to hands-on experimentation and unpretentious play within a more accessible genre, he gets most audiences on their feet.

Another musician who uses live sampling as an instrument is Kaffe Matthews, who bases all her live performances on sounds from the audience and her violin. Placing microphones around the venue she manipulates the sounds into highly seductive compositions that sound very different from their source, using a program called LiSa (Live Sampling). Matthews took part in developing the program herself at STEIM in Amsterdam, and controls it literally with her fingertips via her MIDI extended violin, also her own invention. In Norway the Ost & Kjex duo has found a more humorous way to let everyone in on the process of making crackling beats with their dance floor friendly music. Using cheese and crackers (!) they produce all their sound material on stage, and succeed in taking all the mystery out of beat-making at the same time.

Shake your booty

But there is only so much one can do to make the computer become a virtuoso instrument along the lines of e.g. a guitar, and some say why even try? Another common strategy is therefore to leave the computer and just dance like hell. Or, get the crowd to do so. There is no way that programmed tracks can be reconstructed on stage, so let the playback do its thing and enjoy the music. This makes the laptop musician into a cross between DJ, dancer and crowd pep-coach. Donna Summer, Kid 606, Venetian Snares, Duran Duran

Duran, Doormouse, Knifehandchop and many more all have in common the desire to cut up both popular and obscure music into a high octane mix with a venomous dance floor appeal. Taking the best of the mash-up, which is the cross-breeding of two tracks into one, they move the focus from artist to audience, from stage to dance floor. The breakcore, IDM and gabber scenes all have an audience that overlaps both the experimental and the club scene, cultivating the beat, the break and the hook in all its digital glory.

The party-on-stage attitude is also important for bands such as Chicks On Speed, Peaches and Le Tigre, where punk, feminism and fashion are passionately mixed, while having a whole lot of fun at the same time. There is a strong retro feel to these bands, using primitive drum machines and simple synth hooks in the spirit of the 1980s sound, mixing the punk and disco aesthetics from the same era. This is further underlined by their stage costumes and record covers.

CAMP 2 - TRUE FICTION

Camps collide

Several leading musicians who started in the strictly laptop domain have broken the code of purity and expanded into a broader musical language. Incorporating acoustic instruments and electronics, using the computer merely as another instrument, or eliminating it altogether, these musicians form a collective move away from a 'pure' to an 'impure' aesthetics. In terms of the performance this is good news, as it brings the instruments, gadgets and dirt back onto the stage, and with that the performers. What is common for these acts is their ability to draw an audience that reaches beyond the usual crowd to numbers of simply curious listeners. Narrative, myth and ritual are reintroduced to the stage, and with them come theatre, role-play and a more physical concert performance.

Storytelling

Matmos have extended their laptop language to include acoustic instruments and overt genre adaptations, something that was very apparent on their *Civil War* record of 2003. Cutting up and layering hundreds of snippets from recorded folk instruments, they made an electronic album with an ancient aesthetics, further underlined by knights in armour outfits. They had imposed a similar limitation on source material on their previous record, *A Chance to Cut is a Chance to Cure*, which was made up of sound snippets from plastic surgery. In their case, the narrative serves as a thematic framing of the record, focusing on a sound environment more than a story.

Also from San Francisco, Kevin Blechdom tells straightforward stories of the heart. Having put aside her abstract noise excursions and considerable programming skills, she now uses only the laptop to make more simple backing tracks to her focal activities: singing and banjo playing. Dressed in self-made costumes and addressing her love life in an extrovert manner.

Múm, an Icelandic group that subscribed to the Warp label aesthetics for several years with crackling beats and metric melodies, cancelled this commitment with their latest record *Summer Make Good*. What was once a flirt with fairytale elements has now evolved into an integrated mix of music and narrative. Slowly evolving songs, mystical soundscapes and electric, electronic and acoustic sounds guide the listener through worlds of abandoned ships, mystical creatures and ghosts. Múm has also done readings of Icelandic fairytales, so the connection is clear and the change natural.

Hans Appelqvist from Sweden has also focused on the narrative by composing music around stories from an imaginary Swedish suburb. His *Bremort* record bears the name of this non-existent place, where snippets of conversations and field recordings are mixed together

into semi-cohesive stories, an effort which won him an award from Swedish Radio. This award, usually given to radio plays and the like, proves that experimental music can reach out to a wider audience once a narrative is there to set the order.

The power of the mask

Some artists not only refer to a fictional universe but also become fictional characters themselves on stage, using the performance to spark a theatrical spectacle. Role-play and stage personalities have always been an immediate medium for personal release and performance, and many bands are flirting with these possibilities in a more or less committed way. For example, the use of masks has for some strange reason exploded over the past few years, especially in the US.

The Locust from San Diego perform in specially designed bug costumes. This violent and futuristic synth-grind-band is one of the most intense live acts around, merging hardcore with what one could call insect dynamics. The result is a very original brand of hard, fast and brutal music, which sounds like the soundtrack of an alien bug invasion of planet Earth.

The Residents have been wearing masks for almost forty years and must be mentioned in this context, as they have influenced so many bands, musically and aesthetically. They started playing their very own peculiar music in eyeball costumes in the 1970s, and their true personalities still remain unknown, at least to the general public. Hopefully it will remain so forever. Their performances have steadily increased in scale, and today the group resembles a grand multimedia theatre on the road, with elaborate costumes, dancers and props. The Residents are a living legend that celebrates theatre and myth both on stage and on record.

A mask can really be a blessing for a timid musician, and for Buckethead the mask is essential. He has openly said that he cannot perform without it, nor can he play guitar without tossing in some extra kung fu kicks at the same time. Buckethead IS Buckethead, even when auditioning for The Red Hot Chili Peppers or substituting Slash in Guns N' Roses. A Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket on his head and a hockey mask are what give him his anonymity and with it the superpowers of laser-fast guitar playing and a carefree performance.

Oslo based Mortiiis is another artist that cherishes the freedom that comes with a masked personality. Once a metal head, now a gothic synth pop star, he undergoes a complete makeover every time he performs on stage and sometimes even when going to town for a drink. Elf ears, make-up and an extended nose add up to Mortiiis, a troll-like figure similar to Matthew Barney's creatures in the *Cremaster Cycle* films. Which is why when Barney heard about Mortiiis he decided to let him have the honour of opening his exhibition at Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in Oslo.

Rising smoke

Mortiiis' consistent use of his mask has led to a series of rumours on the web: that he has undergone plastic surgery, that he lives in a cave and that he has eaten children and so on. The same goes for Buckethead; the rumours are many and each more fantastic than the last. This type of projection onto a fictional character is something that seems to happen almost automatically, suggesting a common need for icons, even in the experimental scene. How myths arise is a complicated area of discussion, but the question is closely associated with the stage character. A myth can further grow out of factual events, rumours, misunderstandings, fake press releases, staged pictures and so on. At a certain point a myth can become real, when its adherents – and maybe even the artist himself/herself – have come to believe in it.

Norwegian black metal became an example of this. Spearheaded by Christian Vikernes, aka Burzum, aka Count Grishnak, aka Varg Vikernes, the black metal scene put Norway on the musical map as a place where church burnings and murders actually took place. What for many was a strictly musical scene suddenly became a real anti-Christian movement. After some hectic months the drama cooled off and boiled down to only a few persons and their desperate deeds. But the myth was born and is now firmly rooted around the world. The boundary between pseudonym and actual personality is hard to distinguish in Varg Vikernes' case, since he has officially changed his name and still shows no regrets. Christian Vikernes became his alter ego, Varg.

The rest of the black metal scene has put their past behind them and embraced its more theatrical aspects, such as corpse paint, pseudonyms and costumes. Turbonegro has likewise made the division between stage and real life very clear. Especially following the return of Hank von Helvete from years in rehab, who for a while did not make that distinction clear enough. Man at the ropes, Thomas Seltzer, openly talks about marketing strategies and mass appeal one day, then enters stage as Happy Tom, the gay sailor, the next. It is a combination that is more comfortable to live with, and it is honest. So many bands try to put themselves across as tough thugs, while it is obvious they have day jobs. Turbonegro are both thugs and businessmen, and readily admit it.

Neo-ritual

As the hip hop term MC, Master of Ceremonies, implies, it doesn't take much to initiate a ritual; it starts when you say it does. Every concert is a ritual, the division between audience and artist marked by the stage. An immediate hierarchy is imposed as soon as someone steps above the crowd and presents a statement, a mode of communication as elementary as the pictorial image. Anyone on

stage becomes a point of projection, and the audience lives through the performer. Usually the purpose is to cross some kind of barrier, to live for a brief moment as something different from the normal self. A moment of precise control, or no control, no self-awareness, calmness, trance or physical exhaustion. So, charismatic Christian ceremonies, sports, voodoo rituals and mosh pits have a lot in common. The mosh pit is the area in front of the stage, mostly at metal, punk or hardcore shows, where the audience is free to jump around violently and bash into each other, often in circles. Similarly, in voodoo rituals the participants similarly 'take turns' to be possessed by spirits, causing muscular spasms and fits, and the possessed person can roam free within a safe, buffering circle of others.

Black Dice from New York started out as a self-annihilating hardcore band whose compositions grew more abstract and unfamiliar with every concert, to the point where they left the hardcore scene altogether. The ritualistic traits in their music have not subsided though, and their abstract compositions are heavily influenced by ethnic music, new age and psychedelia. Together with Animal Collective, Gang Gang Dance and Wolf Eyes they represent a group of young bands from the east coast of the USA that merge a confrontational energy with spatial trance inducing sounds. Playing just as often in exclusive galleries or in friends' flats as in regular concert venues, they appeal to kids, the experimental music scene and the art establishment all at once. Their extensive use of sound effects and primal beats results in an almost religious sounding music, flirting with new age and world music, but with a self-awareness that steers them away from it at the same time. A lot of their aesthetics share common ground with Japanese noise rockers Boredoms, who for many are the source of it all. From improv noise to avant rock to drum circles, Yamatsuka Eye leads his herd diligently wherever his imagination calls.

Also coming from a disintegrating hardcore aesthetics are three Norwegian bands, two in which I myself play. Next Life, KILL and

Single Unit all merge elements from the metal and electronic spheres into hybrid styles free of irony but full of experimentation. The unspoken rule that computers and guitars do not mix is largely ignored. Lightning Bolt, an American power duo on bass and drums, bring a similar energy to the stage, and they try to break down the barriers between audience and band at the same time. Lightning Bolt promote a positive but fierce energy in their shows, and have decided to remove the stage altogether. They refuse to play on one even when invited to do so. Furthermore, they perform wearing homemade clothes and masks and using their own PA. Halfway through the set, one of the two Brians moves his drum set further into the surrounding crowd, again altering the division between audience and musicians. Although not an outspoken ritual per se, the result is a very effective spectacle, the floor becoming a form of inverted stage. The band at the bottom of the pit, hordes of sweaty kids piling up around the band from floor to ceiling; it is like a coliseum where Brian 1 and 2 battle with each other in a friendly manner.

SUNN 0))) is another undoubtedly physical and ritualistic experience in concert. Named after a tube amp from the 1970s, and started as an Earth tribute band, name, function and music are conceptually connected. Earth is a guitar duo from Seattle who pioneered the form of the ultra slow and repetitive riffing of tuned down guitars that SUNN 0))) is now known for. Sun and earth revolve around each other through a bond of gravity, and this gravity is represented by low-end guitars and sub bass. Live SUNN 0))) is like a continuous vibrating wall of guitar sound, where robed musicians churn out stripped down riffs, electronic landscapes and percussion-free compositions that come across equally much like pagan ritual as concert.

High and low

A common denominator among all these bands is how they have pulled out of their respective genres into new territory. This usu-

ally means giving up the security and comfort that comes with an established network, and trying to build up a new one. Even in the experimental genres there are many kinds of purists who only approve of certain kinds of experimentation, and eagerly pass judgment on what is pure and impure. Electronic and improvised music: pure. Metal, hip hop or pop music: impure. For example, Keith Rowe of AMM, a group of free improvisers based in the UK, has hailed the improvised gesture as the most 'pure' musical moment, and claims that any pre-prepared music strays from this path. He has also equated popular culture with bad music. But at the same time he maintains that it is the younger generation's responsibility to prove him wrong.

Fortunately it seems that many share this attitude. In fact most of the bands I have mentioned in this article have in common their crossover appeal despite their odd genre references. It can seem as if the focus of the experimental scene has shifted from pure, electronic music to include more of the bands that border on genres outside the usual experimental realm. Which would make sense. Because, if the experimental scene is becoming more widespread and names such as Karlheinz Stockhausen, John Cage, Brian Eno and John Zorn are in the process of becoming household names, then it is only natural that the experimental scene should embrace music which also experiments within the scope of the respective genre. Maybe the time to experiment with the experimental taste is ripe, to investigate the high and low cultures of music, and further the possible readings thereof.

Punk is dead

I think that any music delivered with intensity cannot be ignored, and with time it will become clear who is able to stand their ground. Underground scenes that once grew from a coming together of energetic individuals often degenerate into a dull, exclusive group of

friends with a common past. The only way to avoid this is to keep experimenting and to let genre borders function only as a tool to help understand an ongoing activity, rather than setting ground rules for what should be done. Punk IS dead, I'm afraid, but its spirit has seeped out of its corpse and moved on. And if you want to catch it you'll have to run.

THE SEWING CLUB FROM HELL

Interview with Maja Ratkje and Hild Sofie Tafjord of Fe-mail

Christiane Erharter

I first met Maja Ratkje in February 2003 in order to invite Fe-mail to play at the opening party for the Nordic Pavilion Exhibition "Devil-may-care" at the Venice Biennale in June 2003. Since then I have wanted to interview Fe-mail about their practice of making noise music, how they deal with the male-dominated experimental music scene and – as an admirer of their performances, which are always 'in your face' – to talk about the way they appear on stage. We were finally able to meet in spring 2005.

Maja Solveig Kjelstrup Ratkje (born 1973) is educated as a composer. She is involved in numerous musical projects on the borderline between music, theatre and art performance. She wrote the opera *No Title Performance (And Sparkling Water)*, based on texts from the Nag Hammadi library, and composed *Concerto for Voice (moods III)*. She has worked with Jaap Blonk, Paal Nilssen-Love, Lasse Marhaug and the poet Øyvind Berg, among others. In 2002 her vocal solo album *Voice* was released on Rune Grammofon.

Hild Sofie Tafjord (born 1974) is educated as a French horn player in jazz and improvised music. She has made music for dance, film, theatre and installations, and given performances, workshops and site-specific concerts. She has toured and worked with musicians and artists in Europe, USA, Canada, and Asia. She has performed with Lasse Marhaug, Fred Frith, Paal Nilssen-Love, Matmos and Håkon Kornstad, among others. Recently she has given a series of solo performances.

Together with trumpet player Kristin Andersen and cello player Lene Grenager, Maja Ratkje and Hild Sofie Tafjord formed the band SPUNK in 1995. Ratkje and Tafjord started the noise project Fe-mail in 2000.

Christiane Erharter: Can you say a bit about how you started working together? You were both educated at the Norwegian Academy of Music. You both have solo careers: Hild with the French horn, and Maja as a composer and singer. But you also work permanently together with other people, e.g. SPUNK, Fe-mail, collaborations with other musicians. Why is collaborative practice interesting?

Hild Sofie Tafjord: It started with SPUNK. Maja and I met a year before we came to Oslo, at Toneheim Preparatory Music College. We started in a jazz band. Maja was playing piano and singing and I was playing French horn and singing, and a lot of guys were playing other jazz instruments. Then we moved to Oslo and started studying at the Norwegian Academy of Music. There we met Kristin Andersen and Lene Grenager from SPUNK. We started with SPUNK in 1995. We wanted to have an open setting and create a different kind of language.

Maja Ratkje: The Norwegian Academy of Music at that time wasn't really encouraging people to do projects like SPUNK. It was something we did alongside our studies there. The academy was just a meeting place because we all were teaching or studying there.

SPUNK is not a child of the Norwegian Academy of Music. It's very important to be clear about that.

HT: All of us wanted to start a band. We wanted to improvise with all the parameters of music freely, so we could incorporate anything we wanted. To improvise means to deal with any kind of chosen material, form and dramaturgy. The group communication and the individual contributions make an impact on the sound of the band. There were some guys who were also supposed to be in the band, but they didn't show up for the first rehearsal. So it was a coincidence that the band became the four of us. We're very happy about that now, of course.

MR: In SPUNK we have quite unusual instrumentation. The main instruments are trumpet, French horn, cello, and voice. For the further development of SPUNK we included other instruments. We also added electronics after a few years. SPUNK is now ten years old. We have our jubilee this year and are releasing a new record.

Hild and I felt that working with electronics was so interesting that we wanted to make a duo and develop further into noise music. This is why Fe-mail was created. But SPUNK has always existed and, hopefully, it will always exist.

HT: It's the mother ship!

CE: The name SPUNK is a reference to Astrid Lindgren... You also dedicated one album to her.

MR: Pippi Longstocking created the word 'spunk'. Pippi goes out in the world to look for this word. Kristin suggested it as a title for our band because we are also - like Pippi - looking for something. We don't have the perfect answer, so we're always searching for something in SPUNK and developing. It's a good, positive thing to be in a state of change always.

HT: It's an attitude, a way of thinking and being.

CE: Did SPUNK aim to do things that weren't possible within the Norwegian Academy of Music?

HT: Absolutely. The whole point of starting SPUNK was to be able to come up with other ideas. As we said, we have an odd instrumentation. We had to stress the idioms of the instruments, explore their extremes and what they can do. In the first year of our existence we developed a sound through this instrumentation that is very characteristic for SPUNK.

CE: How long has Fe-mail been in existence?

MR: Since 2000. Our first appearance was in Tokyo. We were just there to visit Japan. Some friends of ours had managed to book us for a job. We did a concert with electronics but we weren't established as a duo with a name. We just played. Then we considered starting a noise duo; we found a name and played concerts.

HT: Japan was a real kick. Guilty Connector, a loud noisy Japanese performer, also played. It was fantastic! It was like "this is something we want to do!" – Great music, great energy.

MR: Then we played our first concert in Norway at the Oslo Art Academy on an outdoor stage. We managed to play for twelve minutes! It was documented on the *NorNoise* DVD. For the first time we felt that we'd managed the form and the sound of noise music. It took a lot of time and work to develop further from there. We had to work really hard for two years to create something interesting. There's been a lot of energy all the time.

CE: The last Fe-mail concert I saw was at BLÅ [a club in Oslo] in January 2005. It was evident that there's lots of communication between the two of you. You built up – not in a narrative way – a story that started

somewhere, went somewhere, and ended somewhere. Everything made sense. I didn't have the impression that this was improvisation.

HT: We've worked a lot with form, in SPUNK too. We're very conscious of working with form and direction in the music, listening and composing together, collaborating with different artists. When we go on stage, it's a different mentality but these processes are still with us. So we know how to shape something intuitively.

CE: Is it important to create something together?

MR: When we recorded our new album in San Francisco now, we did a lot of recordings with free improvisation, but then there was even more composition work afterwards. We spent a lot of time listening to the material, searching for interesting parts, getting into details and putting things together. It's unusual that performers are so concerned with composing as we are. But I think this makes us different from other performers. So even when we improvise at a live performance these things are mentally with us. Hopefully we can prevent the music from becoming too one-dimensional and boring.

CE: Does each of your musical projects – your solo careers, SPUNK, and Fe-mail – have the same weight? Or do you emphasise one or another?

HT: That is a very important question. Generally we don't have to struggle for food and shelter all day long. In our time we have the opportunity of exploring on a philosophical level: the questions about being an individual, and belonging to a group; one's connection to other people; to find out when and how it is healthy to be connected to other people. I think that exploring these things by working solo and collaboratively with other people is very fruitful as long as it functions on a very honest level. Then it's very valuable. Each person has to find her own balance between these projects. You can contribute to the group and withdraw from the group to work

on your own. But these projects are never opposed to one another; they fill out the picture.

MR: The value of a group is something very unique. It's not only to do with being social and having more fun travelling together. Playing in a group means meeting other people musically with your individual preferences, aesthetics, and ideas. Giving to a group that has developed over years, like SPUNK and Fe-mail, means that the whole group takes another form than what you would expect from simply adding the individuals together. The group becomes completely different if one person is missing or replaced. We've talked a lot about this in SPUNK.

Being part of Fe-mail is totally unique. It's very different from what I do when I play with other people, even though it might not sound so different from the audience's point of view. One can find something valuable in these meetings with other people. One might find potential in a group and want to continue. That's why some groups last longer and some are just brief encounters. One needs to meet other people and try different concepts. That's why we are playing with different settings. But the main group-projects for Hild and me are SPUNK and Fe-mail.

CE: Do you put any particular emphasis on the performance?

HT: You mean the concert situation? Well, we are musicians. It is fun playing together for people, so that they can hear and experience the music live. It's the nature of improvised music to interact with people, with the audience and the space that you are playing in too. It has to do with being in a state of change. If one has the mentality of an improviser, one will always get something out of a new place. The live energy is very important.

MR: It goes both ways: The composing part inspires the performance part and the performance part definitely inspires how to com-

pose. Communication is the most important thing in music. The main issue will always be to meet and play for people. It's important to record as well but concerts are much more interesting because then you actually confront people. And it changes oneself as well, in a different way.

CE: I'm thinking more about your way of performing. You're both professional performers, trained in being on a stage and handling this situation. I have the impression that everything to do with your stage appearance is well planned: your clothes, your movements, how you act, how you talk to each other. Is this something you're conscious of?

HT: That's interesting. Yes and no. Again, it's the same thing as with composing, planning and letting go. We just do what's necessary right there and then. We never plan beforehand what to play when we go on stage. We just start somewhere. But everything we do is on purpose. A good improviser is accurate and present. That's why it might seem planned.

We've talked a lot about the importance of meaning in what we're doing, and being consistent. When we 'say' something we try to stick to it and make something out of it. We respond to each other. Because we know each other well, it's possible to predict and recognize what's happening. But we still surprise each other and try taking the music in different directions from what is obvious. The term free improvisation has just as much to do with how you treat what you already know, in order to discover 'new' semantic meanings.

CE: Well, it makes sense when you say that everything is on purpose. Did the name 'Fe-mail' also happen on purpose?

MR: There aren't many women in this musical field, so the name was meant as a joke.

Actually it was a friend of ours who came up with it, and we said “that’s a great name, that’s funny”. We were only going to do a couple of concerts in Oslo anyway, so the name wasn’t that important. Then we made a record – which wasn’t planned. Suddenly it took off and we got stuck with the name.

HT: It has to do with the spirit of improvisation as well. You intend to do something and then impulses come that you can choose to use or not. Like with the photograph on the record cover. A Swedish guy took some pictures of us but we weren’t going to use them. Then we made the record and one of the pictures was chosen for the cover. We were only going to release a small number of pink vinyls anyway so we didn’t really consider the effect it would have when the record took off and got reissued in the USA. It was naive perhaps, but not just that. We think it’s a great contrast to all those anonymous, black, serious covers in the noise field.

CE: As a recipient of your stuff I see it like this: I get this record with two made-up women photographed in a romantic setting with nice clothes, sunglasses... Obviously it’s also funny. This record comes in pink vinyl and is called *Syklubb Fra Hælvete* [Sewing club from hell]. Then I listen to it and get this sort of... sound. Isn’t this also done on purpose?

MR: It isn’t random. The elements are not necessarily made for combination, but might appear in combination after some time. So the elements come together in a form. It’s similar to making music, creating elements and composing. We like to think that we’re good at finding combinations as to how our things can work together, e.g. the pink vinyl with that title and that photograph and the noise music on it. It brings out the music in a good way.

HT: It’s a way of combining things to create a term, which *after* you have created it becomes a term of its own, and means different things to different people. There are lots of double meanings in

everything – triple meanings, multiple meanings. That’s interesting, that one thing can mean many different things.

CE: Do you consider your practice of producing noisy sound also as a refusal, a sign of showing resistance?

MR: We’ve never considered being a part of the commercial industry in the first place. The reason that we choose to play noise is because we like it, and we have a lot of fun doing it. We also include some melodic elements in it. We try not to be dogmatic about it. But Fe-mail is an electronic project. That’s how it started. We wanted to play noise music because we loved it. You can’t say that it’s meant for anything else than that – but of course we’re aware that by playing that kind of music we’re saying no to a lot of typical mainstream offers. That can be seen as a provocation. It’s a side product but not the main focus. The main focus is the sound.

CE: I understand, but there is another side to the story. Here are the two of you wanting to play noise. But there’s also the structure of the system and the context within which you’re doing it, for instance where you are playing. I understand when you say, “This is what we want to do”, but you have to relate completely to structures, to external rules... And you know yourself that the whole scene is very male dominated. Are you making a statement about the structure by calling a record *Syklubb Fra Hælvete* or *All Men Are Pigs*?

HT: That was actually Lasse Marhaug’s idea. It was the male part of that project that insisted on calling the record *All Men Are Pigs*. We would never have come up with that name.

But the title *Syklubb Fra Hælvete* is like using something from our own experience. A part of female culture is, for instance, these sewing clubs. And it is a funny picture, imagining women sitting together and knitting, and socializing in a good way. We do that too but in our way.

MR: We'd just done a concert and were sharing a table with loads of equipment between us, lots of cables and stuff. We said "It actually looks like a sewing club when we're playing and sitting there with all these cables". The sound technician, who was sitting quietly in the corner, said "Oh, syklubb fra hælvetete". And then we said, "oh, that's a great title - we'll keep that!" And we did.

CE: The fact that there are so few women in this field leaves a certain responsibility with the two of you.

MR: Yes, it does. That's true. We know that since there are so few women there's a focus on our being women, and we can't pretend there isn't. We're not so bothered about it since we're so into the music, but we have to be aware of it. We have the responsibility of being role models for younger women. And that requires that we are honest about what we're doing. We have to be careful and mustn't lose the contact with the music and the concert appearance. And that means we also have to show ambiguity in a way that doesn't contradict these things. It's important that we take our jobs seriously and show that we have a lot of fun in addition.

HT: Appearing on stage, it's obvious that we're women. Because it's usually men that perform this kind of expression, it might create a different impression for the listener. But this issue is connected with the physical and social setting, not only to sound. If there were more women in this field, there would be more diversity and the issue not so critical. We're conscious of the more psychological, emotional and social aspects of what we're doing but when we're on stage, making music is what we do.

CE: Of course, I don't mean this in an essentialist way, that Fe-mail are doing this music because they are women. You are responsible and can direct how you are perceived.

MR: Yes, and I think the best way to handle this responsibility is to show that we're serious.

HT: When we were playing the No Fun Fest in New York in March 2005 there were also some other women playing. One of them came up and said, “It was a fantastic experience”. For her it was fantastic to see other women doing these things. It happens that women come up to us after a show and express joy that we’ve elaborated on the perception of how women can express themselves. If this perception is different from male expression and to what extent is only speculation. Regardless of gender, it is important to play with integrity and one’s own energy. There was a guy in Sweden who said, “When I closed my eyes, I could swear these were guys”.

MR: That’s a horrible thing to say! I think that’s the stupidest comment one can get.

And then when we played at the Avanto Festival in Finland there was a SPUNK fan and he asked us, “Is it true that SPUNK is only made up of women?”

CE: You’ve been asked in previous interviews about your relation to feminism. Does feminist history – the activities of women in art and music – back you up?

HT: Because of feminist work throughout history, we don’t have to fight exactly the same battles again. Hopefully we can take it further by letting our work speak for itself.

MR: But saying that is not so simple since our project is not primarily feminist; it’s musical. But it helps to think about these facts when times are tough. Women have been working on things a lot, especially in the art field, not so much in the music field. But it’s not our job to put the things we do in the context of feminist history. That has to be picked up by someone else around us. We have to make music. That is so important.

HT: Yes, it is important. Our music is a contribution.

CE: And the men have to change their attitude too. They should relate to feminist history too. Everybody should be more aware of the political dimension in these settings. It's not a coincidence that there are so few women in this field. There are reasons for exclusion and these reasons need to be analysed in order to be able to change something. This is more complicated and tiresome when one is alone. It is good that there are two of you.

HT: Yes, we're lucky to have a little community with SPUNK; to have each other. The exclusion of women is a very difficult issue. Why has it happened to become like that? Music is a very inclusive art form, so it's unnatural for there to be so few women in, for instance, the noise field. I have to say that the noise and electronic music scenes are in general very embracing and generous surroundings.

MR: It's very strange that there are so few women within experimental contemporary music. We've chosen to do it, so we can't put a finger on the question why others don't. For us it's very natural to be part of this field. The perception of women in society plays a problematic role in this. There are still clichés that women are supposed to behave and be polite. So it's difficult to imagine oneself doing extreme art forms to start with or doing something creative which implies that you have to invent something new – because this is contrary to expectations of fitting in, behaving and doing normal things to be accepted.

CE: Can you say something about your idea of making noise for children?

HT: Children are not preoccupied with what is 'right' or 'wrong' – they hear and experience. And they either get something out of it or not. They explore a huge range of human emotions and expressions when they're small. They're soft and tender, shouting and screaming. It's beautiful to see a child exploring its own range of noise, of its possible sounds. It's also natural to make so-called ugly sounds.

MR: It's a fantastic experience. But here too girls are kept down more than boys. Learning to be *quiet* is stricter for girls. And this makes it difficult for women to become extreme noise musicians.

HT: As far as technical training and knowledge is concerned, it seems that boys start much earlier with technical stuff. This is also a cultural thing. I know I am generalising, but... At one point in my youth I realised that if I'm going to learn something about technical stuff I have to hang around with the boys. It's a terrible thing to say but I had to hang out with the boys in order to learn some specific technical things or to talk about the music I was into – at least at that point in my life. This doesn't negate that I did learn vital things from women and female culture. For sure I did.

MR: I have to comment on this as well. Why is it that one hangs out with boys to learn technical things? Why's it like that? When children reach the point that they become teenagers, society puts so much emphasis on how girls are supposed to look. That's become worse since we were growing up. Young girls have to spend tremendous amounts of time on how they look, on clothes, hair, make-up and all that. They don't have access to the energy for going into technical stuff like the boys. So one has to be *different* to do that. One has to be a 'superwoman' to be able to do both. It requires so much from young girls.

HT: But it's possible to be a girlie-girl, and still be interested in technical things.

MR: Yes, and Fe-mail is an example for this.

HT: I want to quote Modesty Blaise, a cartoon character. She says, "I'm only a lady part-time". This quote tells us that one can choose to be a lady sometimes. It is not like "Oh, you play noise, you have to dress in black. You can't wear a dress or jewellery or make-up..."

MR: “and you’re not supposed to have a picture of yourselves on the cover when you play noise music..”

HT: It’s also a statement of freedom. Many people put a lot of effort into thinking about image. It can be fun, but we’re not doing it in a very calculated way.

MR: It’s a sort of anarchic idea. Pippi Longstocking is anarchic, too. If you want to do something, you can!

CE: When I saw your concert in January I thought here are two people who are very conscious of what they’re doing and also of what they’re doing with each other. You started with these analogue synthesizers. It was very different from other concerts with people sitting behind laptops. It also said something about the communication between two people.

MR: Yes, communication is the core of playing together. We are physical musicians. Playing electronics has emerged from playing music on our acoustic instruments. So we still have a physical relationship to music, different from people who don’t play instruments, but only pushing on/off buttons. We have great communication on stage and you can see that. It’s something that we’ve learned from playing in SPUNK. More than that, it shows that we care about each other.

A lot of people comment that Fe-mail’s music sounds *organic*. That derives probably from this fact that we’re musicians in the first place. The organic sound also comes from the communication process that we have. The sound is always floating. In the sound there are gestures, rhythms and melodic fragments. The sound is always changing. The music is multi-layered. We know that we can control many layers at the same time, and we know what will happen to the perception of this layer if we change that layer. The whole form can change. That requires a lot of training, not necessarily the

training that we got from our education but from being musicians our whole lives.

HT: Playing an instrument or singing is a physical thing whether you trained at the academy or not. Sound is physical, and this is what we like so much about noise music. It's so physical you can almost touch it. When I push knobs I don't need so much strength, I don't need to breathe so consciously. But the knowledge is still there: The way of thinking and feeling the music – knowing when to do what and how. Ikue Mori is a laptop artist, but comes from playing physically. She's so musical and fast and one of the very few musicians who are really connected to their laptop as an instrument.

MR: She's developed gradually over twenty years through playing drums, then drum-machines, and then laptop.

HT: She still has this physical notion in what she is doing with the laptop. The consciousness of what one does and the attitude matter a great deal. There's a link somewhere. Playing this music is not only physical, it is mental and emotional and connected to the entire spectrum of what one is and what kind of experiences one has.

CE: Can you tell about Fe-mail's collaborations with Ikue Mori and Lotta Melin?

HT: Yes. Recently we were playing and recording with Ikue Mori and Otomo Yoshihide in San Francisco. We also have an important ongoing collaboration with Swedish dancer, Lotta Melin. The project is called Agrare. Collaborations can bring fresh energy. Part of the attitude of being human is also to accept that things are changing and are supposed to change and develop. But that doesn't mean that one lets go of one's foundations. A foundation is vital for moving on and developing further. One also reaches more people with collaborations and it takes the music further.

CE: As a final question, can you tell me where the input and the ideas for the music come from?

MR: A musical idea comes from your whole experience as a person. It comes from things that you've been listening to throughout your whole life. It comes from meeting people and situations, from travelling. Inspiration can come from anything. I think one has to be open-minded enough to see potential in all kinds of situations, meetings and art forms. Sometimes it's very obvious that it's inspired by, for example, Japanese art, or by certain other composers or authors; sometimes it's just a general reflection of what it means to be a human being.

DISCOGRAPHY

Among all the records and CDs made by musicians within the field of experimental music in Norway, some get more attention and promotion, and apparently more listeners, than others. Some are more representative or significant as points of departure for further exploration; others are picked simply because we like them. Compiling such a discography of favourites and classics can also be a source of inspiration for further discussion and writing about music.

This discography was compiled by Sindre Andersen, Christiane Erharter, Are Mokkelbost and Anne Hilde Neset.

ARM, *Open Reminder*

(Arne Borgan, Are Mokkelbust, Alexander Rishaug)

CD, 2004, Melektronikk

www.armactivities.com

www.melektronikk.com

BIOSPHERE, *Cirque*

(Geir Jenssen)

CD, 2000, Touch

www.biosphere.no

www.touchmusic.org.uk

DEATHPROD, *Deathprod*
(Helge Sten)
4CD, 2004, Rune Grammofon
www.runegrammofon.com

FE-MAIL, *Syklubb Fra Hælvete*
(Hild Sofie Tafjord, Maja S.K. Ratkje)
LP, 2003, TV5 (reissue on CD 2004, Important Records)
www.femailmusic.com
www.importantrecords.com

KIM HIORTHØY, *Hei*
(Kim Hiorthøy)
CD, 2000, Smalltown Supersound
www.smalltownsupersound.com

JAZZKAMMER, *Timex*
(Lasse Marhaug, John Hegre)
CD, 2000, Rune Grammofon
www.jazzkammer.com
www.runegrammofon.com

LASSE MARHAUG, *The Shape of Rock to Come*
(Lasse Marhaug)
CD, 2004, Smalltown Supersound
www.smalltownsupersound.com
www.lassemarhaug.no

NEXT LIFE, *Electric Violence*
(Hai Nguyen Dinh, Tormod Christensen)
CD/LP, 2005, Cock Rock Disco
www.cockrockdisco.com

ARNE NORDHEIM, *Electric*
(Arne Nordheim)
CD, 1998, Rune Grammofon
www.runegrammofon.com

NOXAGT, *The Iron Point*
(Kjetil Brandsdal, Nils Erga, Jan Christian Kyvik)
CD, 2004, Load Records
www.noxagt.com
www.loadrecords.com

ORIGAMI ARKTIKA, *Vardøgr*
(Rune Flaten, Kai Mikalsen, Kjell Øyvind Bråten,
Bjarne Larsen, Tore Honoré Bøe)
CD, 2002, Silber Records
www.silbermedia.com
www.kunst.no/origami/arktika

MAJA RATKJE, *Voice*
(Maja Ratkje, John Hegre, Lasse Marhaug)
CD, 2002, Rune Grammofon
www.ratkje.com
www.runegrammofon.com

ALEXANDER RISHAUG, *Panorama*
(Alexander Rishaug)
CD, 2002, Smalltown Supersound
www.smalltownsupersound.com

RYFYLKE, *Boknafjord*
(Sten Ove Toft, Stian Skagen)
CD, 2004, Roggbif Records
www.roggbif.com

SINGLE UNIT, *Family of Forces*

(Are Mokkebost)

CD, 2002, Jester Records

www.jesterrecords.com

www.b-o-r-g.org

SKARNSPAGE, *Skarnspage*

(Fridtjof Lindemann, Nils Petter Strand)

CD, 2002, Lilac Sky Records

www.lilacsky.com

SPUNK, *Den Øverste Toppen På En Blåmalt Flaggstang*

(Maja Ratkje, Hils Sofie Tafjord, Kristin Andersen, Lene Grenager)

CD, 2002, Rune Grammofon

www.runegrammofon.com

www.spunkmusic.com

SUPERSILENT, *1-3*

(Jarle Vespestad, Helge Sten, Ståle Storløkken, Arve Henriksen)

3CD, 1998, Rune Grammofon

www.supersilence.net

www.runegrammofon.com

VARIOUS ARTISTS, *Le Jazz Non - A Compilation of Norwegian Noise*

(Lasse Marhaug, Supersilent, Kjetil D. Brandsdal,

Continental Fruit, Fibo-Trespo, a.o.)

CD, 2000, Smalltown Supersound

www.smalltownsupersound.com

VARIOUS ARTISTS, *NorNoise*

(Documentary DVD/compilation CD)

Film directed by Tom Hovinbøle, CD compiled by Lasse Marhaug

CD/DVD, 2004, OHM Editions

www.ohmrecords.no

VERKSTED #4, 2005

Authors

SINDRE ANDERSEN (born 1982 in Fredrikstad/Norway) is a freelance writer and a student at the master programme of culture and ideas, University of Oslo. He is a contributor to a. o. *Ballade*, *Mute*, *Morgenbladet* and co-organiser of the experimental concert series *Dans For Voksne*. In 2003/04 he did a weekly radio programme on experimental music and noise at Radio Nova FM 99,3. His music projects include the bands Duo Kanel, Psycho Mafia, Domestic Purpose and (lyd)2, and the music label TV5.

UTE META BAUER was the founding director of the Office for Contemporary Art Norway (2002–2005). She works as associate professor and director of the Visual Arts Program in the Department of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge.

CHRISTIANE ERHARTER (born 1974 in Kufstein/Austria) is based in Oslo and works as a curator for the Office for Contemporary Art Norway/International Studio Programme Oslo. She did numerous lectures, texts, radio programmes, and installations on (electronic) music and women representation. Together with Sonja Eismann she did the text and installation "Re-Punk Electronic Music!" as one part of the hub *Sonic Scapes* at the 3rd Berlin biennial for contemporary in 2004. Modified versions of "Re-Punk Electronic Music!" were presented at the *Ladyfest Vienna 2004* and at *VAE8 (Octavo Festival Internacional De Video/Arte/Electrónica)* in Lima/Peru in 2004, among others.

KIM HIORTHØY (born 1973 in Trondheim/Norway) is a visual artist and graphic designer. His characteristic cover-design for Rune Grammofon is part of the label's identity. He lives in Berlin and Oslo.

ANNE HILDE NESET (born in 1973 Stavanger/Norway) is based in London and works as Deputy Editor of *The Wire* magazine. She has compiled ten volumes of "The Wire Tapper CD" compilation series, as well as a compilation CD of Norwegian avant-garde music as commissioned by the Royal Norwegian Embassy in London, and regularly contributes to the Wire's weekly radio show on Resonance 104,4 FM. She is also Associate Director of Electra, a London-based contemporary art agency that specialises in new collaborations across sound art, moving image, music and the visual arts. Electra was founded by Lina Dzuveropvic and Anne Hilde Neset in 2003.

www.electra-productions.com

www.thewire.co.uk

ARE MOKKELBOST (born in 1976 in Oslo/Norway) is an artist and composer. He is a member of ARM, KILL and Single Unit. For more information on Are and his projects see: www.b-o-r-g.org

Backissues:

Verksted #1, 2003, NEW INSTITUTIONALISM

Editor: Jonas Ekeberg

Contributors: Eivind Furnesvik, Julia Bryan-Wilson, Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt

ISBN 82-92495-00-2

Verksted #2/3, 2004, HOW TO LOOK AT ART-TALK - How To Look At Aesthetics, How To Look At Capitalism

Editor: Jonas Ekeberg

Contributors: Alexander Alberro, Sara Arrhenius, Ute Meta Bauer, Ina Blom, Nicolas Bourriaud, Sabeth Buchmann, Roger M. Buergel, Lars Bang Larsen, Eivind Røssak, Gertrud Sandquist

ISBN 82-92495-01-0

International order: Vice Versa Vertrieb, info@vice-versa-vertrieb.de

For each edition of Verksted, we select one artwork to serve as a backdrop, or counterpoint, to the theme of the issue. For *Sonic North* we have selected the installation *Sound Barrier # III* by sound artist Maia Urstad, based in Bergen. It was produced for the exhibition ELECTROHYPE 2004 – Third Nordic Biennial for computer-based and high technological art at Malmö Konsthall in Sweden.

Sound Barrier # III consists of around 130 CD/tape-players and radios assembled as a wall. Visually, these devices function as structural elements inspired by historical stone constructions. On a sonic level, they mediate the sound implemented in the installation: Urstad's composition of electronically manipulated sounds that originate from radio waves and Morse code – sound signals that will fall into oblivion sooner than expected. For more information see: www.maia.no



**Sindre Andersen
Christiane Erharter
Kim Hiorthøy
Rune Kristoffersen
Lasse Marhaug
Are Mokkelbost
Anne Hilde Neset
Maja Ratkje and Hild Sofie Tafjord**

Editors:

**Sindre Andersen
Ute Meta Bauer
Christiane Erharter**

OFFICE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART NORWAY

www.oca.no

ISBN 82-92495-03-7

*05-MRO-340