



LOOK AT THE MUSIC
SEESOUND

Ystad Art Museum, Ystad, Sweden
Neon Gallery, Brösarp, Sweden
Museum of Contemporary Art, Roskilde, Denmark

Thanks to Birgit Rausing

LOOK AT THE MUSIC / SEESOUND

Anthology

© copyright The writers and artists,
Look at the music/SeeSound

Printing:
AB Ystads Centraltryckeri 2002

Editorial board:
Thomas Millroth
Morten Søndergaard
Jakob Weigand Goetz
Ellinor Gylling

Graphic Design:
Caroline Seehusen MDD

Partners in Look at the music/SeeSound:
Ystad Art Museum
Museum of Contemporary Art, Roskilde
Neon Gallery, Brösarp
The East Scanian Artists Guild/Gallery Tjörnedala
Kabusa Art Hall
The Print Shop in Brösarp
Ystad Theatre
JHB-Editions, Löderup
Rock Club Chorus, Ystad
Gimle, Roskilde
Roskilde University Center

Look at the Music/SeeSound is supported by
The Kulturbro Foundation and is part of
Kulturbro 2002 – a biennial of Art and Culture
in the Øresund Region.

The anthology include two CDs,
one from Look at the music,
the other from SeeSound.

ISBN 91-87258-38-2 (dansk/svensk upplaga)
ISBN 91-87258-39-0 (English edition)

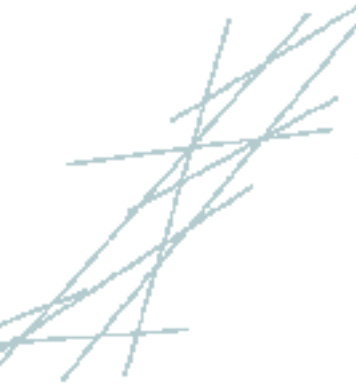


INDEX

- 4 Intro**
by the Editors
- 6 Sound Art – An Inter-aesthetic Project**
by Morten Søndergaard
- 13 Electronic Listening Music – New explorations into musical parameters**
by Jakob Weigand Goetz
- 20 Sensitive Electronics**
by Torben Sangild
- 30 Noise, 'Noisality', Nostalgia**
by Henrik Marstal
- 39 Christian Marclay**
by David Toop
- 45 Post-everything Except the Future**
by Rob Young
- 50 What You See is What You Hear**
by Thomas Millroth
- 54 Record Covers as Parerga**
by Alan Licht
- 60 The Art Of Listening**
by Edwin Pouncey
- 65 Anton Corbijn**
by Lennart Persson
- 72 Swedish free Impro**
by Thomas Millroth
- 90 This is Our Music**
by John Corbett
- 98 Peter Brötzmann**
by Felix Droese
- 109 Åke Hodell**
by Magnus Haglund

The background of the page features abstract, hand-drawn teal lines that crisscross and intersect, creating a sense of movement and complexity. The lines vary in length and orientation, some being straight and others slightly curved, all set against a plain white background.

INTRO



Berlin, Köln, Tokyo, Chicago eller New York ... Den eksperimentelle musikscene, med dets forskellige musikalske genre såsom Free Jazz, electronica, avantrock har altid haft sine scener rundt omkring i verden. De senere år er musikere fra disse forskellige scener ofte fundet sammen i en slags global musikscene, hvor fællesnævneren er eksperimenter med de teknologiske (re)medier, som er udviklet indenfor de seneste år.

Jakob Weigand Goetz skriver i sit bidrag til denne antologi bl.a., at: "I midten af det 20. århundrede havde de europæiske komponister udfordret brugen af de akustiske instrumenter så voldsomt at der var brug for nye måder at skitsere og frembringe samtidsmusik på. Med bl.a. John Cages udfordring af vores forståelse af begrebet musik ... blev [eftertidens] komponister konfronteret med helt nye aspekter i musikken ... såsom støj, reallyde og elektronisk frembragte lyde ..."

Inden for den nye musik sætter Look at the Music/SeeSound fokus på to af samtidens eksperimenterende musikscener: dels den improviserede musik, eksperimenterende rock og Free Jazz, dels den minimale elektroniske lydkunst, med særlig vægt på den sensitive genre Electronic Listening Music (ELM).

Med denne antologi er det tanken at indkredse de to eksperimenterende musikscener ud fra deres fælles historiske udgangspunkt i 60'ernes avantgarde og undersøge scenernes tværæstetiske potentialer – musikkens poetiske, performative, visuelle og auditive sider, og forholdene mellem disse. Der er bidrag om 60'ernes avantgarde af Magnus Haglund. Om de eksperimenterende lydsceners sammensathed af David Toop og Morten Søndergaard. Om Electronic Listening Music (ELM) af Jakob Weigand Goetz, Torben Sangild og Henrik Marstal. Om Avantgarde Rock af Rob Young. Om improviseret music af John Corbett og Thomas Millroth. Og om Plade-covers af Edwin Pouncey og Alan Licht.

Look at the Music/SeeSound er arrangeret i tæt samarbejde mellem Ystads konstmuseum, Neon Gallery Brösarp og Museet for Samtidskunst i Roskilde - samt ÖSKG/Tjörnedalagården, Kabusa konsthall, Grafikverkstaden i Brösarp, Chorus, Roskilde Universitets Center og Gimle i Roskilde. Look at the Music/SeeSound indgår i Kulturbro 2002 og er støttet af Fonden Kulturbro.

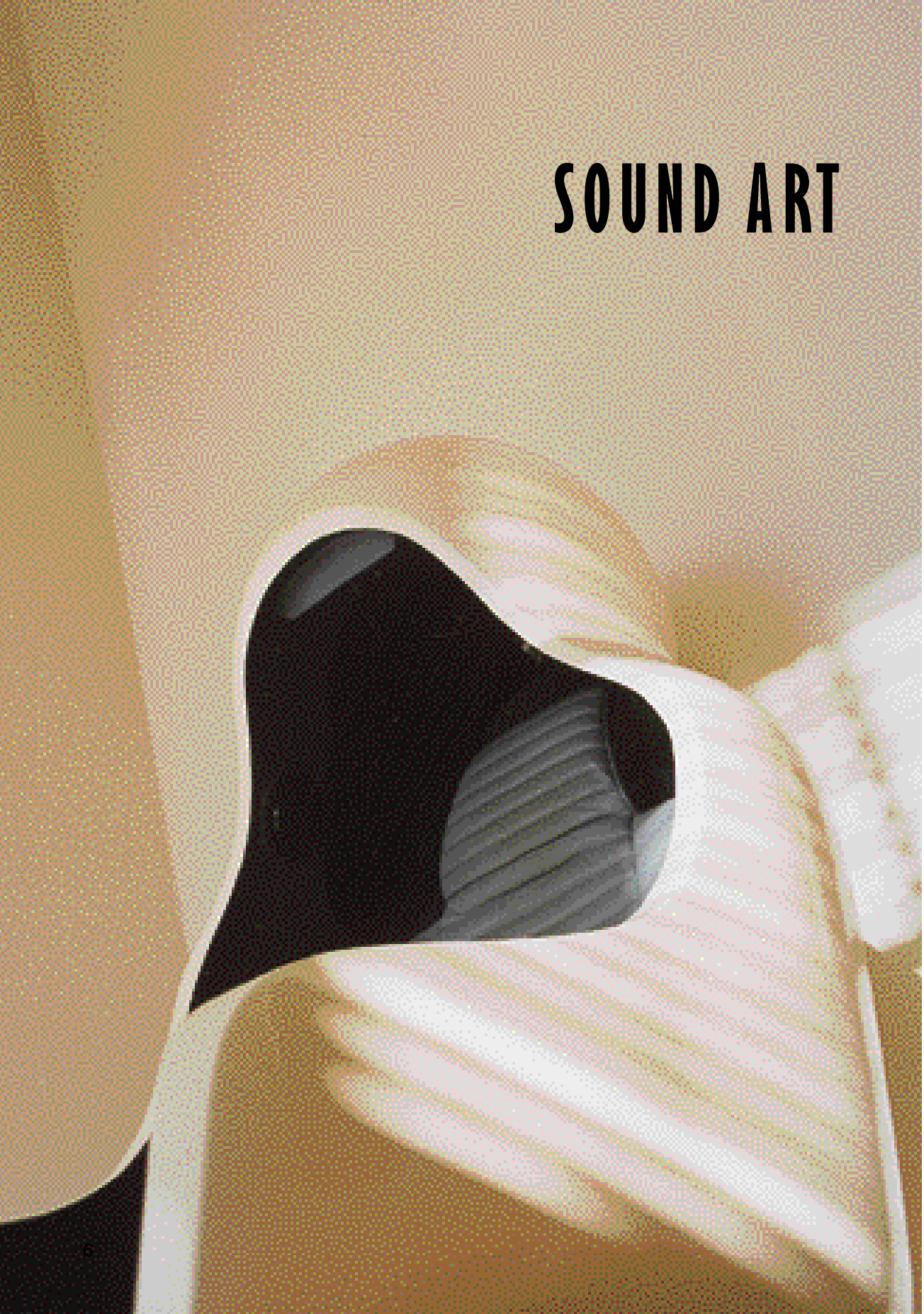
Vi ønsker at takke vores samarbejdspartnere, vores sponsorer og alle jer, som har bidraget til antologien og til at realisere Look at the Music/SeeSound.

Ellinor Gylling
Konstnærlig ledere
Neon Gallery
Brösarp

Thomas Millroth
Museichef
Ystad Konstmuseum
Ystad

Morten Søndergaard
Museumsinspektør
Museet for Samtidskunst
Roskilde

SOUND ART





— AN INTER-AESTHETIC PROJECT

by Morten
Søndergaard
Curator, Museum
of Contemporary
Art, Roskilde

Translation:
Thorbjørn Tønder
Hansen

*I don't make a great fuss about the fact that I am a fine artist or that music is a component of my installations or exhibitions... On the other hand... I always find it difficult to explain that I am interested in other things. Architecture, theatre, everything influences me, and I would like these different aspects to be acknowledged.
Breaking through categories... was always important to me...*

Carsten Nicolai ¹

Sound art is an inter-aesthetic project. Due to its inter-aesthetic nature, sound art calls for a discussion of categories and conceptions. And its nature does not facilitate a description of it. Thus, a tendency to neglect the inter-aesthetic aspect itself is often seen as a way of enabling oneself to at least say something – or as a way of fitting sound art in with the already-defined subject specific categories of the modern humanities. As Carsten Nicolai expresses above: It is indeed difficult to explain “that everything” influences him – and to be accepted for it.

But before I become absorbed in this knowledge-theoretical aspect of our topic, it is important to hear Carsten Nicolai's statement as part of the landscape that the sound artists themselves outline with their way of producing art. Since, it seems, no discussion on categorisation is relevant unless it is based on experience.

Teddy Hultberg, curator of the 1999 soundscape exhibition at the Museum for Contemporary Art in Roskilde², has described the comprehensiveness of the term sound art:

Sound art is the universal term for a field that is not clearly defined but in which artists, composers and even poets, on their own or in collaboration, try to test and expand the limits of artistic-musical creation. Under the umbrella term Sound Art, or such variants as audio art, ARS ARCUSTICA, we find sound installation, soundscape, text-sound composition, poésie sonore, EAM, live-electronics and multislides as well as performance and actions in which the acoustic element is essential. ³

In dealing with such a vast field, an evident danger of ending up with incomprehensible discussions of categories is at stake. In his text, Hultberg expresses this danger – but at the same time he perceives the transverse as a particularly intense matter in our electronic present – the time of new media:

1) Nicolai, Carsten:
Interview with Martin
Pesch, IN: Frieling &
Dieter (eds): Medien
Kunst Interaktion,
ZKM/Springer Verlag
2000

2) That presented the
Stockholm-based
Fylkingen

3) Hultberg, Teddy:
“SoundArt – bits and pie-
ces of a noisy story” IN:
Hultberg (ed): SoundArt –
The Swedish Scene, STIM
2001

The Audiotèque at
the Museum of
Contemporary Art,
Roskilde

Photo Morten
Søndergaard

4) Op.cit.

It is evident that today's artists and musicians often do not stick to one medium of expression but work across the traditional genres. And the genres, in our electronic era, become increasingly diffuse, threatening finally to make the constant discussion of crossover art incomprehensible. ⁴

However, the inter-aesthetic does not just serve as an excuse to discuss categories. For a number of specifically interesting artists, it emphasises a new awareness of producing works based on the media and materials at hand – or rather, making sense, making a difference in a culture where meaning and language more than ever are based on electronic media and international networks.

Richard Kreische perceives the inter-aesthetic tendency differently. To him, the art of new media – including sound art – contains more than just another “formal” change of expression and media. As he has it, our language about art is revised and our role as beholders and critiques of art is changed. Widening the discussion of categories and conceptions includes the possibility of revising man's status as “a being of knowledge”. We become aware of the fact that our language, the limits of our knowledge and ourselves are entities of change:

... a discussion of the “new media”, i.e. the “electronic media”, will have to include a discussion of the language of art and thus of our self-consciousness as well. ⁵

5) Kreische, Richard, IN: Artificial Intelligence in the Arts, no. 1, 1985

Aesthetics Adieu

This extensive widening of the framework of art is expressed by Carsten Nicolai in our opening quote. It includes the awareness that aesthetics is no longer a well defined category within the different art forms or in the humanities; rather, it has developed into inter-aesthetic processes of consciousness and production, where everything is at our disposal – and many a sound and media artist agree with him, producing works accordingly. However, not everyone is capable of the same authoritative quality of ideas and works within sound art and visual art as Carsten Nicolai. But the overall play with categories and the movement between art forms call for a fundamental discussion of art's impact on human thinking and action in different political, social and cultural contexts. The inter-aesthetic is a vast phenomenon and its widening impact is not just limited to the arts, but also include emerging structures of language and culture beyond the direct control of the artists – a condition Carsten Nicolai is sharing with media artists in general. As the video artist Daniel Pflumm has it,

All I did was what interested me: a kind of research or perhaps more of a game than research ... I work a lot with chance and actually chance deserves the applause. ⁶

6) Pflumm, Daniel: “In One Eye and Out the Other” IN: Kunstforum, 143, 1999

Sound in particular seems to be the phenomenon expressing this inter-aesthetic exploration of the foundation of language and cultural consciousness in constant change. The American sound artist

Brandon LaBelle names this a downright invasion of the public space:

Sound overwhelms its own limits, refracting across social space – it seeps through the cracks and disturbs another’s sleep, violates demographic borders, spills over. In other words, sound interferes... In this way, sound is never a private affair, rather it invades public space, occurs within a multiplicity, as a multiplicity. ⁷

7) LaBelle, Brandon:
“Private Call – Public
Speech: The site of language – the language of
site” IN: LaBelle & Migone
(eds.): Writing Aloud – The
Sonics of Language, 2001

However, the inter-aesthetic strategies that new media artists apply to their art are not new. Inter-aesthetic production and strategies also have a history that it is important to be aware of. It is inextricably linked to theoretical discussions of science within the humanities, and it widens the perspectives of sound and media art’s impact on all that is beyond the field of aesthetics in general – a rather large impact that is.

In the following, I will outline a short introduction to an inter-aesthetic strategy, including an historical perspective. Furthermore, I will aim at answering the important question: How can an electronic, inter-aesthetic poetics be defined?

A bit of history ...

In an historical perspective, three main paradigms related to the perception of art can be outlined, roughly speaking. This broad classification helps illustrate the range of the problem of introducing an inter-aesthetic awareness within science and amongst the public. I take the freedom to list the three paradigms in keyword-form, as they are only to serve as the background for my attempt to define an electronic, inter-aesthetic poetics:

- 1) Idealistic. Middle Age, Catholic – mythical.
Paradigm: The world is perceived through signs – colours and signs reflect the “transparent” and omnipresent sphere of ideas. Signs are nothing but shadows of the true, authentic level of ideas – but they are all we have in order to relate to the world, and only through them we can approach truth. The artist creates representations of the mythical, and does so through many forms (what we today call art forms).
- 2) Materialistic. Visuality.
Paradigm: We gather knowledge about the world by throwing the light of our senses and intellect on it – by interpreting the world as a representation of meaning and ideas. The art forms are defined on the basis of materialistic paradigms. Avantgarde artists are outsiders, messengers of Utopian ideas.
- 3) Anti-materialistic. No visuality. Invisible structures.
Paradigm: Questioning the necessity of (visual) signs. Ideas are invisible, existing as auditive structures in time.
- 4) Electronic Revolution? More on this below.

Towards a transformed inter-aesthetic field

The Futurists were among the first contributors in a transformed inter-aesthetic field – and they were also the first to underline that sound art is all about the concrete, spatial phenomenon that sound constitutes. It was physicians as the Dane Hans Christian Ørsted (1777-1851), who in their experiments were the first to make use of the acoustic elements of sound. By virtue of these elements, they described sound as a physical phenomenon, as waves, spread and refracted in space. This is really striking in the modern metropolis, where, as the Futurist Luigi Russolo described it, the machines and their noises are multiplied:

*This musical evolution is paralleled by the multiplication of machines, which collaborate with man on every front... /... Let us cross a great modern capital with our ears more alert than our eyes, and we will get enjoyment from distinguishing the eddying of water, air and gas in metal pipes, the grumbling of noises that breathe and pulse with indisputable animality, the palpitation of valves, the coming and going of pistons, the howl of mechanical saws, the jolting of a tram on its rails, the cracking of whips, the flapping of curtains and flags. We enjoy creating mental orchestrations of the crashing down of metal shop blinds, slamming doors, the hubbub and shuffling of crowds, the variety of din, from stations, railways, iron foundries, spinning wheels, printing works, electric power stations and underground railways.*⁸

8) Russolo, Luigi, 1913

The sound art and the inter-aesthetic explorations of the Futurists into concrete and imaginary architecture and space are examples of an anti-materialistic paradigm. This is in glaring contrast to the materialistic paradigm in science that peaked at around the same time.

Ut pictura poesis et cetera

Around the turn of the 19th Century, one could say that gaps emerged between the modern strata of experience (even more complex and wider ranging than before), the contemporary art in spe (distancing itself from traditional ideas on aesthetics and the work of art) and the humanities (where it had become even the more common to describe cultural expression and art forms on the basis of their mimetic characteristics and their abilities of reflecting the visible reality). Gaps that are still somewhat present, but which the (electronic) inter-aesthetic poetics helps bridge and differentiate.

One characteristic of the humanities at the turn of the 19th Century is the resistance towards developing an understanding of inter-aesthetic projects that per definition are beyond the differentia specifica of one art form or one subject. As an example, a heated debate (later named the “Ut pictura poesis debate”⁹⁾ emerged between scholars, on whether images or words represented reality in the most truthful way. On a deeper level, this discussion arose in the wake of the extensive specialisation in the sciences at the time – a time where comparative literature, musicology and art history were founded. A more immediate

9) after Horace's dictum, “as the image, so the word” in Ars Poetica

aspect was represented by a discussion on how visuality in a mimetic perception of the world should be categorised – one idea was that poetry had to be combined with a concrete, lifelike and physical representation in order to really be aesthetic, whereas the aesthetics of painting was beyond language. By time, the question arose whether poetry is at all visual; and vice versa, whether painting is the most complete art form, a natural, universal language? Is literature superior as language “speaks”, while painting is just copying? Is iconisation the best way of establishing a relationship to reality? If so, how can this natural language be translated into an “artificial” language of poetry? And are any of these transformations based on chance?

In short, the “*Ut pictura poesis*” debate, and the inherent disparagement of inter-aesthetic knowledge and strategies, created a gap between content and form in the arts, and succeeding it, a tendency towards an exaggerated focus on the formal aspects of art is seen. Furthermore, this has led firstly to a strong perception of the function of paintings as a visual reference to reality (the iconic) and secondly, to a focus on symbolic or allegoric references to specific literary sources in paintings (iconography). The study of music became a concern exclusive to musicology and the music academies.

Moreover, this situation has given room to a peculiar perception of the inter-aesthetic as a formalistic discourse – something it is absolutely not. If it is anything, the inter-aesthetic represents an alternative way of producing art, differing from a formal, art-form-specific or even work-centred one. The inter-aesthetic is a framework within which the artist is free to include anything at hand in a conceptual visualisation of more or less conscious strategies. On a theoretical, interpretational level, the inter-aesthetic is present within the boundaries of a relational semiotics defying historical description. The history that can be written is often media-related or possibly connected to specific production-related circumstances. The research in inter-aesthetic projects such as sound art can only be carried out in inter-disciplinary contexts – including physicians, mathematicians, electro-engineers, computer programmers, composers, authors, literary critiques, art historians, scholars in the performative field, musicologists, etc. etc... The research in sound art, acoustics, noise (“the music of surroundings”) and other inter-aesthetic phenomena has been significantly absent in the humanities – and it is probably only within the last decade that a slightly more embracing understanding has emerged. However, a strictly scientific, inter-aesthetic move towards the founding of an interdisciplinary, academic department is still badly needed.

An electronic, inter-aesthetic poetics

Inherent in inter-aesthetic strategies is an ambition to unveil and change the aesthetic norms of our culture and an attempt to reveal contemporary aesthetic categories and the conditions of knowledge. In recent research on the field, the idea of an “ambient Century” has been launched – a century where sound art and media art, in the

widest possible sense, have occupied all kinds of cultural spaces and gradually destroyed the conventions within the materialistic paradigm. Around the millenium, digital technology is the last card in the sleeve, and as Mark Prendergast explains, everything is now thrown into the sonic soup:

*...newer musical hybrids [have] blurred old prejudices, making it acceptable to like an eclectic mix of styles. At the end of the twentieth century old categories... no longer really applied. Everything was thrown into the sonic soup by virtue of new digital technology.*¹⁰

10) Prendergast, Mark:
The Ambient Century,
London 2001

It appears to me that the last decade has brought forward an urge – mainly within sound art and media art – to found a new kind of “artistic research”, elaborating on intermediality and the inter-aesthetic discussion of categories. This research is focusing on the inter-aesthetic and aims at building up a new framework of references and discourses of language for a global network of artists. It is a new kind of in-side artistic research, as opposed to the typical outsider position of the avantgarde. It may not be the founding of a fourth paradigm, but allow me to play with the idea for a moment anyway. What is presented at SeeSound can be defined in many ways, but primarily we have chosen the term ELM – Electronic Listening Music. Imagine then, that the works of this global lap-top scene have a kind of pre-paradigmatic character, imagine that they indicate the art of the future. Our contemporary situation then seems very equal to a scene in William Borroughs’ essay Electronic Revolution from 1979. In his own singular manner, Borroughs describes a festival of sounds, where artists and visitors are mixed together in soundscapes and on big screens... This description will be our closing remark, serving as an early call for the electronic, inter-aesthetic poetics that SeeSound seeks to present to a broader public. It is not only about the artist as insider, networker and project founder – no, the entire global village is there as stage:

Imagine a [...] festival [...] festival area comprised of car park and camping area, a rock auditorium, a village [...] a large wooded area. A number of tape recorders planted in the woods and the village. As many as possible so as to lay down a grid of sound over the whole festival. The recorders recording the crowd and the other tape recorders that are playing back at varying distances. This cuts in the crowd who will be hearing their own voices back. [...] We can carry it further with projection screens and video cameras. Some of the material is pre-prepared, [...] and this material is cut in with live TV broadcasts and shots of the crowd. Of course, the rock festival will be cut in on the screens [...]

All the quoted writings are on display in the library of the Museum for Contemporary Art.



ELECTRONIC LISTENING MUSIC

- new explorations into musical parameters

by *Jakob Weigand Goetz*
*Composer,
Producer and
Curator*

*Translation:
Thorbjørn Tønder
Hansen*

In autumn 2002, The Museum for Contemporary Art in Roskilde, Denmark, presents the festival SeeSound, consisting of three parts.

- October 15-17, various authors will present introductions to Electronic Listening Music, and lap-top artists will demonstrate musical software.
- October 17-19, three marathon concerts (Thursday, Friday and Saturday night) are presented, where some 20 lap-top artists from Denmark and abroad will perform.
- Later in the year, the Danish choir Ars Nova will perform “Song Books” (1970) by John Cage.

1) The concept “musical parameter” first of all includes the five classical parameters, melody, harmony, form, sound, rhythm. Also, a number of extensions are included such as counterpoint, amplitude, spectrum, density, dynamics, space, timbre, phrasing, instrumentation, texture, groove, energy and soundscape. It is in relation to the six latter parameters that the endeavour of the lap-top artists on SeeSound is especially innovative.

The Museum for Contemporary Art has invited these lap-top artists to SeeSound, because they are exploring musical parameters in ways never heard before.

Through a couple of examples from the history of music, I will try to pin down the legacy of the artists at SeeSound (those composers and currents which – consciously or subconsciously – have been of particular importance) as well as their aims (those parameters which due to the certain possibilities and limitations of the lap-top generation are explored in detail).¹

The legacy of John Cage

John Cage is the composer who above all challenged European composers of the 20th century to focus on a number of parameters not previously in the limelight on the old continent. The manifold European acoustic instruments forming a symphony orchestra were based on the mutual frequency of the sounds. The result was a kind of music especially centred around the parameters of melody and harmony as well as the language-imitating phrasing and rhythm originating from them. The notational system with the staff, value of notes, phrasing signs etc. supported and cemented these parameters as central to the European idea of music.

In the middle of the 20th century however, the European composers had distended and exhausted the use of acoustic instruments (and thereby especially the parameters of melody and harmony) to extremes, making it clear to many that new ways of outlining and

producing contemporary music were needed. With the challenge from John Cage and other composers, one inevitably had to seriously consider if composing was still possible at all, and if this was the case, whether one would write music for acoustic instruments and the traditional notational system or use new technological conquests, making it possible to:

- a) incorporate completely new aspects into the music such as noise, sounds of reality and electronically produced sounds.
- b) add new dimensions to the experience of music such as energy, groove, sound, amplification, a renewed function of repetitive rhythms and “a condition” rather than “narrative”.
- c) redefine the old rules of instrumentation by eliminating the sound sources through the use of electronic devices, and instead introducing a completely new sonorous texture rich in timbre and emancipated from any kind of instrument.

Because of all these new musical dimensions, melody and harmony took a back seat in some music circles for the first time in European history, and became only secondary parameters compared to the new and so far inconceivable sound facets.

Just as old music is written for the old acoustic instruments, the rise of electronic instruments and music software for the computer demands an evaluation of music and its parameters. Playing Rachmaninov on the theremin or imitating handplayed instruments with the sequencer programme Cubase is thus not at all experienced as progressive. With the distinctive characteristics of these “instruments”, the theremin of the thirties provided – and the software of today provides – composers with a unique possibility of producing music that was unimaginable with older instruments. Already in the middle of the 20th century, John Cage did indeed insist that the new technological instruments demanded a “new music” and that they should not be used to reproduce old music. An age of new instruments needs its own repertoire. A violin is much more suitable to the performance of a sonata by Rachmaninov than the theremin, and it thus logically follows that the theremin should be used to perform a completely different kind of music. Likewise, the sequencer should not be used to imitate drumming since the result of such an attempt is a cold and fossilised music without feeling. In the beginning of the nineties however, the sequencer in turn contributed to a “new music” within the genres jungle and drum’n’bass, as drum-sounds were sampled and then speeded up, producing a completely new percussive effect impossible to imitate for a drummer. In jungle and drum’n’bass, the parameters of rhythm and groove were evaluated, and today progressive composers are aware of this musical experience as a potential compositional tool.

Cage was also fascinated by the sounds surrounding us, which we just perceive as noise rather than music, and his fascination of Zen permeates his reflections on sound. The sounds of the surroundings appear as noise until the very day that we possess enough energy and presence to absorb it. Only then it becomes music. The piece

4' 33" (1952) stems from this idea (a pianist sits down at the piano and does not play for four minutes and 33 seconds). Through listening to this piece, we are to "hear" and understand that music drained of sound will always contain a musical experience – but the piece now consists of the sounds we would normally perceive as noise when listening to music. 4' 33" consists of exactly the musical parameters a traditional piece of music would suppress. This experience has created a basis for reflecting on and producing music anew. At concerts we live with the minor noise sounds that are not part of the music, because they are unavoidable. Likewise, people in cities accept that the CD-player is never alone in playing as the music from the loudspeakers is mixed with the noise of the street. Prior to Cage, these noise sounds of chance were not perceived as possible parts of the musical experience. Rather, they were unavoidable nuisances that had to be accepted. However, through the experiences stemming from the music of Cage, it is possible to even perceive these noise sounds of chance as integrated aspects of the overall listening experience.

Ambient Culture

Because of their far-reaching consequences, the ideas of John Cage have been multiplied ad infinitum. He named the sounds always surrounding us "ambient noise" and thus, he is the originator of the specific musical connotation of the term. With the term "ambient noise", he incorporated the inevitable human sound world always surrounding us into his musical universe.

In 1975-83, Brian Eno – who was greatly inspired by Cage's extension of the concept of music – produced a series of ambient-releases (such as Music for Films and Music for Airports) that reached a broad audience, legitimating the perception of music as background and as sound profitable of being mixed with already existing "noise". Eno's ambient-releases proved to be a great source of inspiration for the following generation and its thinking on music. Now, 25 years later, Eno's music is a milestone on the road to Electronic Listening Music (ELM), in which phrases and great, epic narratives (and in its most consequent form also with melody and harmony in the background) are not used either, and in which the everyday sounds surrounding us are incorporated and further manipulated with the use of current software. ELM (or Electronic Listening) is a term that within the last five years has been specifically used by a lot of people about the new generation of artists that since about the mid-nineties have developed an electronic music neither made for the dancefloor nor born of the music academies.²

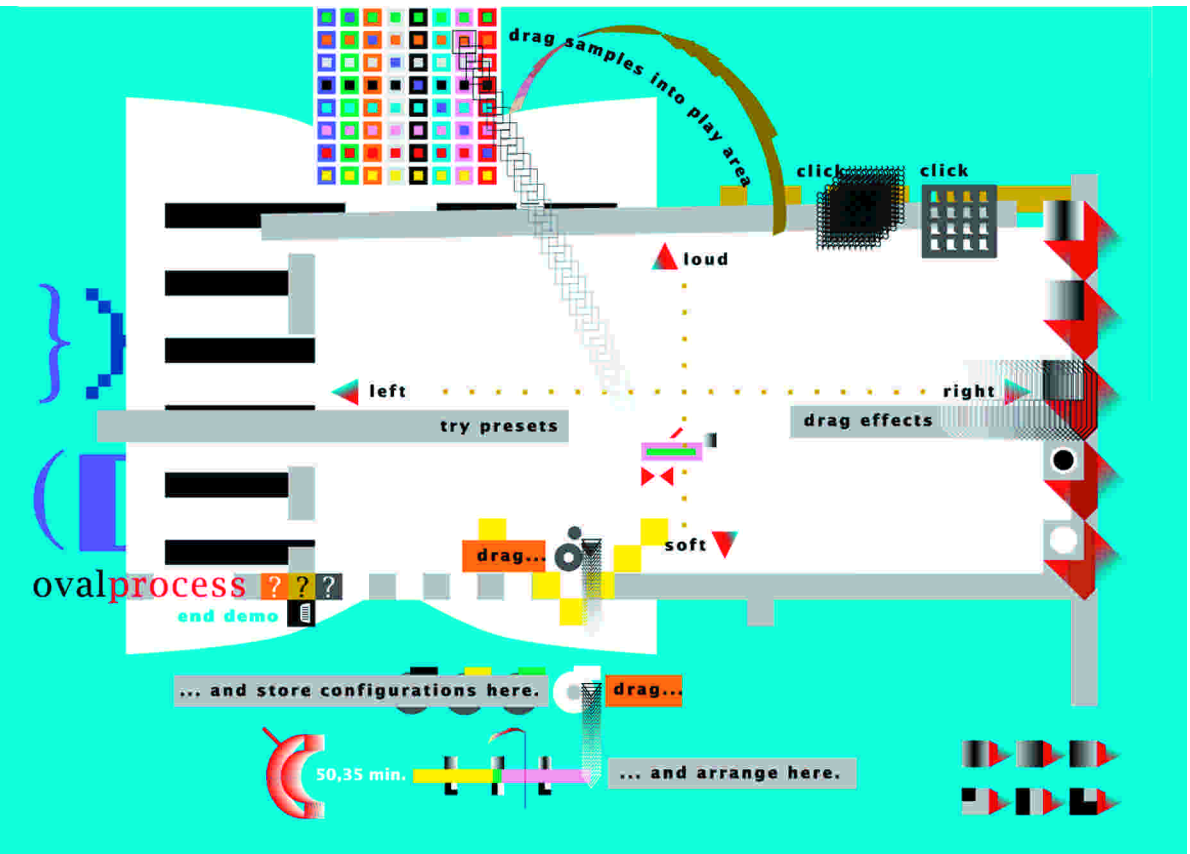
A characteristic of ambient music and the succeeding genres arisen from ELM (such as digital processing, clicks+_cuts, cutting edge, illbient and microscopic music) is that it is possible to listen to the music with the volume being very low, in which case the music is mingled with the sounds of the surroundings without necessarily losing its "listening value". Brian Eno and the electronic listening generation produce music in which the noise sounds of chance,

2) The concept "electronica" is also – often – used here instead of ELM, but the problem is that today, "electronica" is also sometimes used as a generic term for all electronic music as such.

always present when music is performed, are incorporated into the music without a feeling of “loss” for the listener. It is a kind of urban music, incorporating and reflecting the constant humming and pulse characteristic for cities – in contrast to the old music of the European tradition performed in operahouses and concert halls, where noise is suppressed in vain.

Minimalism re-magnified

In addition to the legacy of ambient music, a great part of the new electronic listening generation is inspired by minimalism. Currents within ELM even make the old pieces of the sixties and seventies sound turgid by comparison. The puritan part of ELM has re-magnified minimalism so to speak – each loop is under review. The examination of each “cell” (a short sequence that is repeated) in the minimalism of the sixties is now further intensified as an examination only of each “fragment” of a cell.



Oval’s music is an example of software possessing a decisive influence on the final musical result. This is also reflected in the visual expression created as part of the process.

Perhaps the computer as compositional tool is the reason for this being possible. Using computer software, it is possible to “magnify” even the slightest noise or error sounds, making them objects of examination or even the main theme of a composition. The computer can be seen as an especially large telescope making even the slightest sounds audible, whereby a kind of particle music emerges.

EAM versus ELM

It is worthwhile mentioning some differences between the electronic music produced by educated composers from the academies and the music produced primarily by club-scene performers, who have previously been involved in popular music in general. The gap between the two circles diminishes these years, but some characteristics of each circle are still present.

The composers of academic electroacoustic music (EAM) have always worked as pioneers with the distinctive character and narrative potential of single sounds. Due to the close connection to academic institutions, the composers are usually working with professional software.

In contrast, a characteristic of ELM is that to a great extent, the music is produced by use of cheap software, making it impossible (or undesirable) to create sounds of great plasticity. Rather, short sounds are impudently twisted (processed) by use of over-gaining, time-stretches, pitches or brutal filtering. Naturally, this lo-fi aesthetic is also a result of the lacking capability within the education system to embrace musical talents, who for whatever reason do not meet the requirements of the institutions. Within the last 20 years, this has led to a number of musical innovations being produced on already outdated technological equipment, as some composers did not have access to the professional gear of the institutions.

A large arsenal of well-processed sounds in “spaces of greatness”, rich in timbre and depth, characterises EAM.

Apart from a focus on ambient and minimalistic music (and thereby on a few sounds rather than many), ELM focuses on the soundscape, energy and noise – especially a legacy of noise rock. Moreover, ELM is characterised by “error sounds”, and with the use of this aesthetic idea, a so far unheard fragility emerges in the soundscape. This fragility produces a new kind of intimate musical presence that at times makes professional musicians sound like machines in comparison. (On the distinct sensitivity of the computer, see Torben Sangild’s article).

Within EAM, the harmonic parameter as well as the aspects of instrumentation and texture are often just as dominant now as 50 years ago.

The harmonic structures within ELM are most often simple, as this parameter is pushed to the background in order to explore other parameters such as groove, phrasing and texture.

EAM is very concerned with – and tied to – history. Because of the state of crisis in the first half of the 20th century (that has never really been completely refuted), each composer is very eager to stamp out

the crisis by seeking to mark out new premises for composed music.

Apparently, composers within ELM work in a more unconcerned way without having a particular eye to history. This is somehow a salutary fact, telling of crisis being absent. ELM has found its niche (its listeners, its distribution channels) and in the coming years, it will produce a “never-before-heard” music within these frames.

The musical parameters from an historical point of view

A quick retrospective look at music history shows that the periods of the Baroque, Classicism, Romanticism and the twelvetone music has focused on different musical parameters. The parameters have even “developed” independent of each other. In *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, (1949), Theodor W. Adorno pointed out that, “every time an isolated material [i.e. parameter] developed in the course of history, there were always other materials remaining undeveloped, thus contradicting the more progressive aspects of a work.”³

Thus, the counterpoint peaks in the polyphonic technique of the Baroque, while it was more or less hidden in Romanticism, as it was only suitable as a supplement to the homophonic technique. Classicism focused on melody rather than harmony, while harmony however became more and more “insistent” throughout Romanticism and sometimes even turned melody into a mere function of harmony. Furthermore, Adorno claimed that in a well-composed twelvetone-piece, a complete indifference between harmony and melody is achieved, and he also stated that this compositional technique is simply a result of Arnold Schönberg’s search for equality between all musical parameters.

My intention with these remarks in this context is to point out that a composer cannot successfully challenge all musical parameters at once. The twelvetone music – and the later serialism – ended up in a musical abyss. Instead, one has to sense: Which way does the wind blow, which new instruments or which new software give the composer a hint about the possibility of new musical explorations reflecting his time in the best possible way? And how can some parameters be pushed into the background (i.e. be simplified) as easily and elegantly as possible, in order to prevent other musical circles from perceiving these parameters as vulgar repetition of music of former times?

That harmony and melody are dominating parameters in Western music is seen in the polarisation of the fine arts and popular culture that has been in progress for the last 50 years. There has been a tendency to either produce extreme harmonic-melodic complexity or to find the lowest common denominator, resulting in unchallenging and unexciting music.

ELM breaks with this either-or mentality by just pushing the harmonic and the melodic aspects into the background instead of really dealing with them. This has especially proved a challenge to the music academies, where an aversion to take a kind of music serious that does not contain great complexity on the harmonic and melodic

3) Here, translated to English from the Danish translation: Theodor W. Adorno: *Den ny musiks filosofi, Tiderne Skifter*, Danish translation by Henning Goldbæk and Arno V. Nielsen. pp. 52-53. For a full English translation, see: *Philosophy of Modern Music*. Trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster. New York: Seabury Press, 1973

levels is very much alive. In the good old days, heart and mind were delighted when understanding the structure of a Beethoven sonata for the first time; now, one has to surrender to a well-functioning sub-woofer reaching the listeners' belly at concerts on the club-scene. The harmonic and melodic parameters are usually banal, and it irritates the inveterate "classical" listener. Among many other things, he or she for instance has to get used to a "conditional music" rather than a "music of narration". (On "condition" versus "narration" see Henrik Marstal's article.)

ELM and composition

That the harmonic parameter and its complexity has been abandoned by composers of ELM to give room to other explorations also has to do with the way they compose. Often the starting point is an interesting and short sound file. With the available software, this is then processed in every imaginable way. When this is done, a unique piece of material has emerged that may be of stunning beauty in itself, but nevertheless, it can indeed be difficult to figure out what to do with such a fragment (apart from looping it), as its counterpart or "dominant" does not exist to the same degree as in the traditional, notated music.

Thus, the finished sounds in this kind of composition emerge as a result of trying out countless ways of processing a given sound until musical quality of some kind emerges. This way of working, where one continues to try out his luck – fumbling about – until a glimpse of something interesting is caught, could be labelled the trial-and-error-method. But what is to happen after this process is a question that history does not help answering. It is here the real "contemporary composer" has to start working. If the electronic listening generation in the coming years gets a grip on the more expensive software products and extends its compositional ambitions, ELM will shortly be a very strong representative of a "contemporary sound".

Here, the attempt to outline a contemporary portrait of the ELM anno 2002 has been carried out. The history from John Cage via Brian Eno to American minimalism etc. is necessarily an historical construction. The fascination of machines in Futurism, the incorporation of everyday noise in *Musique Concrète*, the commencing visions of sound processing in *Elektronische Musik* and popular culture's massive influence on contemporary culture have not been included in my narrative above and are elements beyond the scope of this article.

Welcome to SeeSound!



SENSITIVE ELECTRONICS

**- provisional, philosophical essays
towards an aesthetics of contemporary
electronic music**

*by Torben Sangild
PhD-student in
Modern Culture,
University of
Copenhagen.
Writer and critic.*

*Translation:
Thorbjørn Tønder
Hansen*

How can a machine express feelings? I will reflect on this and other questions in the following text, an accumulation of initial, experimental reflections towards an understanding of Electronic Listening Music and electronic music in general. Each reflection follows its own tangent with the intention of sparking the reader's imagination. They are all open to discussion, and the reader is hereby invited to participate.

While most of the reflections are concerned with ELM in a contemporary perspective, the last two emanate from historical questions about minimalism and ambience, put forward by editor Jakob Weigang Goetz. Along the way, I will also discuss the body, the organic, noise, errors, the irrational, the minimal and the surrounding space.

1. The absent body

In acoustic music, the musician is present as the performing body – not only in live situations; it is not necessary to see the saxophone player in order to hear his breath or to see the guitarist to perceive his finger movements. This is all embedded in recordings as traces of the performing body. Even when actual breath or finger movements are not heard, they are present as physical form and limitation. The saxophone player cannot play a note ad infinitum and the guitarist has to strike the strings to make them vibrate. Here, we are dealing with the indexical level of music, the trace of the physical production of sounds. Apart from bodily sounds, the indexical can also be mechanical sounds (such as the scratching of pickups) or recognisable sounds of reality.¹

In most electronic music, the indexical level has been completely eliminated. It did not happen over night, though. For decades, record producers have manipulated the physical limits of the mixing process, and tape loops and synthesizers are only slightly marked by their physical origin. Around 1990, the rock band My Bloody Valentine – transgressing the rock aesthetics in many ways and anticipating

1) This concept of the indexical originates from the philosopher C.S. Peirce and his very influential tripartition of sign types into icon, symbol and index. The icon refers by similarity, the symbol by convention and the index by virtue of a trace (that is often physical). The three types are often present in the same sign, at different levels.

2) For a thorough reading of the music of My Bloody Valentine, see Torben Sangild: *Støjrock og støjens æstetik*. A brief version in English is found in Torben Sangild: *The Aesthetics of Noise*.

elements of the electronic music to come – worked with what they called “the-not-quite-really-there-sound”: The touching of the guitars had disappeared from the soundscape and as a result, the sounds loomed imperceptibly, thus losing their materiality. Combined with other ideas – such as mixing the vocal part into the very background of the soundscape on the same level as other instrumental parts as well as maintaining a general harmonic vagueness in the eroding chords – it endowed the music with an unreal, dreamy character.²

In electronic music, it is the rule rather than the exception that you no longer recognise the physical origin of sounds. Using digital technology, the artist is able to suspend all natural laws of sound-making, and the technology represents an extreme control over the musical material.

Fundamentalists tend to think that this is exactly the problem of electronic music – alienated and hostile to the body. By eliminating the body, the human aspect of music is also eliminated in surrender to the machine, they believe. As an immediate, instinctive reaction, this position is understandable, but it suffers from three mistaken ideas.

First of all, the elimination of the body’s indexical trace does not mean the elimination of the physical per se. Per definition, music still has a sensuous character; and usually, it contains a great degree of movement or stagnation, resistance or letting go, concentration or diffusion, pulse or flow, balance or imbalance, building up and easing off, breaks, stumbling, staggering and hesitation. We experience these musical movements because we already have bodily experiences of similar character. We do not only listen with the ears, but rather with the entire body – also when we are seated without moving. In sum, we do have bodily experiences of the music even when detached from its physical-bodily origin.

Secondly, the people accusing electronic music of its coldness and emphasising the warmth of acoustic music are of the opinion that music has to be a medium of relief, helping man to breathe freely in an otherwise alienated existence. As opposed to this, any critical perception of art contains an insistent idea that art has to reflect the contemporary society surrounding it instead of simulating a fake idyll. If contemporary culture is technological, if the subject is cooled off, contemporary art has to imply these conditions. And then, in the dialectics of a work, art can express the idea that life could be different. This is what happens when technology is implied in a self-critical way. It is life that needs to be exuberant. If it is not, if life is ascetic in society as a whole, art has to reflect that.

Thirdly, the whole issue is in fact highly ambiguous. Technology is not just cold, acoustic music not only warm – rather, both aspects contain a number of dialectic reversals. Pushing a few of them to extremes: In the hot sweat of the improvising musician, the theatrical dissimulation lurks alongside the rarely fulfilled demand for constant presence, often turning into a cold attitude of routine. Likewise, the attainment of a free, graceful appearance for the classical, Western musician requires years of physical discipline, ascetic renunciation and ruthless competition. On the other hand, the cool, calculating

microchips of computers contain a number of weak points – almost an inner warmth. (see part three, *The Ghost in the Machine*, below). Moreover, rather than viewing computers as cold or alien, the people who use them in creative processes perceive them as an extension of the body. Few young people tend to consider the machine and its music as cold.

The absence of the indexical trace in electronic music opens up a decisive possibility to level out the differences in the perception of sounds from various sound sources and to create a new synthesis of real and synthetic sounds. Thus, the differences between sounds created on a computer, sounds played acoustically and sampled sounds of nature are reduced. Nature, the machine and the body are no longer opposites.

2. Non-organic synthesis

The traditional perception of classical music is based on the idea of an organic development of the music in the work, the movement, the phrase. The music has a direction through melodic and harmonic means, it contains highlights and transitions and it is hierarchical. The rhythm is elastic-organic rather than metronomical, with the extension of the first beat in a bar as an example. Music is viewed as an organism with characteristics equal to those of nature.

In jazz, pop and rock, this organic understanding of music is also present in different ways – swing and grooves are central characteristics here, and a band often strives to be one body. Here, the goal is usually also organic expression.

By contrast, non-organic music contains different layers or separated segments, put together without the ambition to create an organic entity in a traditional sense. This is the principle of collage. In the beginning of the 20th century, this principle was gradually anticipated by composers such as Charles Ives, Gustav Mahler, Erik Satie and Igor Stravinsky. The pioneer Edgar Varèse, who among many things outlined visions for the use of electronic instruments, turned the organising of sound segments into a principle of composition. Non-organic music contains more edges and seems raw and brutal from letting contrasts and fragments stick out implacably, rather than seeking a well-balanced style.

Nevertheless, an ambition to create some kind of synthesis is indeed at stake – but instead of an organic synthesis we are now dealing with a non-organic synthesis. Culture – the city, the machine – rather than nature, serves as a model. The city is a space for sudden encounters and the coexistence of heterogeneous elements. And in a traditional sense, the machine is the object of the unflagging, pounding, mechanical pulse and metallic brutality.

Musique Concrète is devoted to the principle of collage (the city). Inspired by music of the Third World, minimalism is an example of a style containing a strict rhythmic repetition (the machine). There is rarely a direct thematisation of the city and the machine, but the cultural and bodily experiences do shine through in this music as well as in other 20th century art forms.

What we see here, is the outline of a non-organic aesthetics. This aesthetics is a kind of starting point for electronic music, characterised by the non-organic due to its own medium. With *digital* technology, it seems as if we have moved even further beyond nature and the organic. However, it is not quite that simple. A lot of the ELM composers seek the irrational in the machine, as it will be pointed out below. Moreover, nature is still a central category for composers such as Biosphere, who, on an entirely different musical basis than the Romantics, works with sublime experiences of natural phenomena, thereby expressing different, contemporary reflections on nature.

3. The Ghost in the Machine – noise, error, fragility

Usually, we think of computers as cool, rational beings. They do what they are asked to do, making calculations of logarithms in binary codes. And logarithms in binary codes are very, very rational, we think. The fact that we get annoyed with the computer behaving irrationally every day does not change this fundamental notion.

By people unacquainted with the developments within music, electronic music is often perceived along the same lines: as cold and calculated, expelling the human aspects of music. Human music is soft and warm and analogue and physical and organic. Computer music is cold and calculated and digital and rigid and mechanical. The human is a fallible, autonomous being and the machine is an infallible slave. The human being is the subject, the machine an object. It just isn't that simple. To get this straight, I will start with a detour around noise.

In the beginning of the 20th century, some composers became interested in sounds previously perceived as unmusical. Until then, certain sounds had been cultivated and others excluded. The incorporation of noise in music was both a recognition of sounds of everyday life (especially in the city) and of sonorous qualities so far rejected as ugly and brutal. Thus, a very powerful expansion of sonorous possibilities took place, and this is part of the reason why the category of sound is viewed as a very important parameter in 20th century music in general.

Noise in rock music was developed primarily using electric guitars and amplifiers. Feedback and distortion were originally unwanted disturbances, erroneous and ugly sounds. In the sixties, guitarists – with Jimi Hendrix and members of Velvet Underground as the pioneers – started using these sounds as musical effects, transforming the noise into signals. In eighties postpunk, the guitar-noise-aesthetics was cultivated in various innovative ways by bands such as Sonic Youth, The Jesus & Mary Chain, My Bloody Valentine and Band of Susans.³ Today, the use of guitar noise is a very common effect in mainstream music, and innovation no longer comes from the rock scene.

Noises are the sounds traditionally expelled from music, which have returned with the vital force of the repressed. Noise is the grit in the smooth, harmonious machinery. And among many other things,

3) See Sangild op.cit.

noise is the sound of the non-functional as well the waste sounds of the functional.

Just as rock musicians have done, artists working with electronic music have explored noise sounds of various materials, especially in recent years – a CD skipping; an overloaded computer, tilting or attacked by a virus, etc. As early as the late eighties, the Fluxus artist Yasonau Toné applied tape, chewing gum and razor blade scratches to CDs, resulting in the notorious sound of disc error (tuck-tuck-tuck-tuck). Apart from the inherent conceptual aspect of exploring the fragility of the medium, it became clear that it also contained a lot of potential sonorous nuances. Thus, Toné paved the way for the ELM-genre called “glitch”. Since then, glitch has developed in many directions, and usually, the sounds of machine errors are combined with other, softer sounds. As it can be heard in the works of artists such as Oval, Andreas Tilliander, Microstoria, Jonas Olesen, Txture and Pixel, it is possible to create a marvellous beauty using the glitch techniques. In this synthesis, sounds, which in their pure forms are almost unbearable for longer periods of time, have an ambivalent character of ugliness and delicacy. And even more than that: The machine is the basis of a music of such warmth, fragility and subtlety that in comparison, human beings almost appears violently rigid in their massive oafishness.

In the attempts to invent artificial intelligence, the big challenge is to succeed in creating artificial irrationality and subconsciousness. To this end it is attempted to induce a certain amount of unpredictability and chance elements. Furthermore, it is attempted to animate the machine by making it function *as if* it had a soul. As some philosophers have it: maybe this is what human beings do – behave *as if* they had a soul?

Glitch music adopts the irrational aspects of technology, underlining the fact that not only humans are fallible. The machine is musically animated, often with unpredictable results. In the proper sense of the word, art thus becomes experimental.

4. Towards an objective sensibility

Since the Romantic Movement, the opinion that the principal object of art is to express feelings and that feelings are fervently subjective, has been dominating. In the fifties and sixties (and with inspiration drawn from the historical avantgarde), artists and composers increasingly broke away from these ideas to create art that was not at all fervent. Many people are instinctively provoked by the sheer fact that some composers base their work on system or chance rather than using their specific, musical intuition to create sounds of beauty.

Nevertheless, it is often the case that these systems are open and rarely rigid. Furthermore, music can be expressive without being fervent, as for example the music of Iannis Xenakis, who composed using stocastic systems and architectural models, creating anything but cold music. That art expresses something is not equal to the artist transmitting personal feelings, adopted and felt by the listener. This model of expression needs an objectification.

The artist creates objects and gestures of meaning in concrete

contexts rather than creating spiritual contact to his own inner life. And yet the objects and gestures only exist in so far as they are objects of experience involving a moment of subjectivity, where we use our sensibility in a registration of the work's objective yet open potential of meaning. In order to accomplish meaning in art, a dialectic between the subject (the spectator, the recipient, the fellow participant) and the object (the work, the gesture) must be in play. This takes place in an institutional context, providing a framework for this dialectical creation of meaning.

Furthermore, the critical potential of art is also implied here, containing the possibility of a doublebound experience for the recipient. On the one hand, an exact experience of general cultural modes in a concrete historical situation. On the other hand, an experience of resistance towards this situation, made possible by expressing what is not normally articulated, or by making the resistance manifest in order to open the door for a changed perception. By setting sensations and feelings in motion beyond the sphere of the ordinary, art is capable of challenging our habitual perception of the world. There is always a closer connection between sensations, feelings and thoughts than the dominating understanding reveals.

Obviously, electronic music contains a different sensibility and expression from most acoustic music. The sound of technology itself is part of the aesthetics. This does not make electronic music less sensitive than other kinds of music; rather, electronic music reflects that our emotional life has become partly fused with technology. In that sense, electronic music is more sensitive, more subtle than music hollowly reveling in hackneyed feelings without being attentive to its own context.

5. Minimalism in the history of music – historical reflection I

Dealing with grand historical constructs often implies immense and unfair generalisations. Nevertheless, it is enlightening and inspiring to sometimes zoom out from the fragmented details of music history to reflect on their philosophical implications and positions in a greater narrative.

If we are to review minimalism along these lines, we will have to return to the beginning of the 20th century and the emerging distaste of the more sensitive minds within the avantgarde for the exorbitant gestures and increasingly blurred harmonics of Romantic music. The Romantic movement and its entire tonal language seemed more and more out of step with a growing process of innovation in music, of which I would like to point out two aspects:

Firstly, a focus on new sounds and noise as it is described elsewhere in this article.

Secondly, the revolt against the major-minor tonality, leading to free tonality (often labelled “atonality”). The narrative logic of harmonic relations, in which one chord anticipates the next within classical music, was replaced by a total liberation of the tones and the

positioning of them. It was Schönberg who took the decisive steps, and later he also rationalised the free tonality in a new system, the twelve-tone system, constructed partly to guarantee that one would not relapse and compose tonally again.

After the Second World War, this need was even greater as Romantic music with its bombastic character was now inevitably linked with The Third Reich; composers such as Boulez and Stockhausen went even further in the attempt to rationalise music “away” from tonality and all its manners by using complicated (and often mathematical) systems. This was perceived as a purging, as an elimination of the tainted tradition with the intention of creating a completely new tonal language. One of the absolute rules within this tonal language stated that it could neither be based on consonances (i.e. pleasant sounds in the traditional sense) nor on repetitions and furthermore, a discussion on whether it would ever again be acceptable to play a triad (i.e. a traditional major or minor chord) was seriously carried out. Before the war, Schönberg thought so; actually, he perceived the music based on dissonance as a temporary stage in music history, and he would not have been surprised if consonant music could again be created one day without being defined as music of relapse.

And maybe – to draw the long bow – minimalism was this new and accepted consonance-based music. The composers of minimalism created an extremely simple and repetitive music that did not sound like anything composed before it. In the sixties, minimalism was indeed one of the new and vital alternatives to commercial, conformist pop music on the one hand and a sometimes very esoteric contemporary classical music on the other. Like avantgarde jazz and the upcoming progressive rock music, minimalism was viewed as a possible third way. The fact that minimalism later stagnated in clichés and that some of its grand old men have moved toward a romantic soundscape is another story.

Today’s minimal ELM does not fall into the decay of the grandiose, popular concert hall sound where the composers of the minimalism itself often ended up. Minimal ELM attracts another crowd and contains another sensibility. It is digitally fragile instead of being acoustically voluminous. Rather than exploring harmonic and melodic patterns of repetition, it seeks sonorous difference in the similar and sonorous synthesis in the dissimilar.

However, like minimalism, it is often meditative. La Monte Young’s experiments with a drone played on acoustical instruments in the beginning of the sixties is not essentially different from Pan Sonic’s experiments in the nineties with a single, electronically generated tone, of which the sonorous character is gradually modified. It is impossible to listen to this music with a restless mind without being irritated. Instead, one has to agree to the meditative terms and to the idea that it can be exciting and mind-opening to listen to nothing but minimal displacements of sound. If this is the essence of minimalism, it is indeed easy to hear that it has passed on to today’s ELM.

6. Ambience and the minimal object – historical reflection II

Sometimes detours are useful. In order to outline the connection between minimalism and ambient music, one could make a detour through the visual arts – i.e. minimalist sculpture (or the minimalist “object” as the artists preferred it in order to distance themselves from the prevailing tradition).

In many ways, minimalism in the visual arts is analogue to minimalism in music. One common aspect is that both distance themselves from what is often labelled “modernism” or “high modernism”, i.e. abstract visual art and the atonal avantgarde. Despite the obvious differences between the objectivism of the (European) avantgarde in music and the heroic subjectivism of (American) abstract expressionism, the counterattack contained a new simplicity in both cases. In music, it was a reaction against the increasing complexity; in the visual arts, it was a reaction against illusionism and “relationalism” (the preoccupation with the inner relations of a work). Both within music and visual arts it was believed that simplicity contains a powerful potential of expressing the contemporary.

Part of the endeavour in the minimalism of visual art was to create powerful objects with no inner relations, but with a matter-of-fact like appearance, relating to a concrete space and a concrete situation. The objects were vacant and blank, almost banal, and they did not encourage a sensuous engagement. Not only the viewer’s position in the space, but also the presence of other people and the overall character of the space became part of experiencing a work. Whether experiencing a collection of bricks arranged on the floor in a gallery by Carl André or a number of similar boxes sticking out from the wall by Donal Judd, the surroundings, the ambience, became an inextricable part of the experience.

In 1967, the American art historian Michael Fried named this phenomenon *literalness* and associated it with something *theatrical*. While paintings, to which Fried ascribed a specific artistic quality, transgressed their own “objecthood” and expressed more than just a canvas in a space, the minimalistic object expressed just that – a specific object in a specific space. Fried perceived this as a destruction of art, which to him distinguished itself exactly by a transgression, an illusion (even if it was abstract). Thus, Fried stated that the theatrical – relating to a situation, taking part in dialogue – was an enemy of art. The theatrical had to be eliminated from all other art forms, as it threatened the essential distinctions between painting, sculpture, music and theatre itself.

We now know that it turned out to be exactly the opposite, that the theatrical and the inter-disciplinary aesthetics have become almost natural elements in the arts. This is especially present in Cage’s music and also in the later ambient music, where the importance is not attached to an inner narrative in the music, but rather to a theatrical kind of music in a concrete situation, where sounds and incidences surrounding it become part of the total experience.

Rather than being understood as an intense inner journey in a temporal narrative, the music is objectified as a sonorous object in space. Thus, the music contains ideas of a different sensibility and of another form of experience. We are not dealing with a concentrated mode of listening, but with a preoccupied being-present, with the music as just one element characterising the situation.

Ambient is not predominant on the music scene – neither as a compositional idea, as a genre or as a mode of listening. But it has established itself as one of many accepted ways of composing or listening, and – at its best – it cannot be rejected as muzak or as an escape from silence. Performers such as Biosphere, Tomas Köner, Pulseprogramming, Curd Duca and countless others are working with a contemporary, electronic, ambient music that can fill a space without being importunate, while at the same time being a matrix for important sonorous experiences.

However, in dealing with ambience, two things threatening the concept as genre have to be observed. First of all it is possible to perceive *any* music as a background soundscape in a concrete space, and probably this is actualised with all kinds of music now and then. Secondly, ambient music is also suitable for intense, inner listening experiences with the eyes closed.

Thus, rather than being a genre, ambience is a way of situating music.

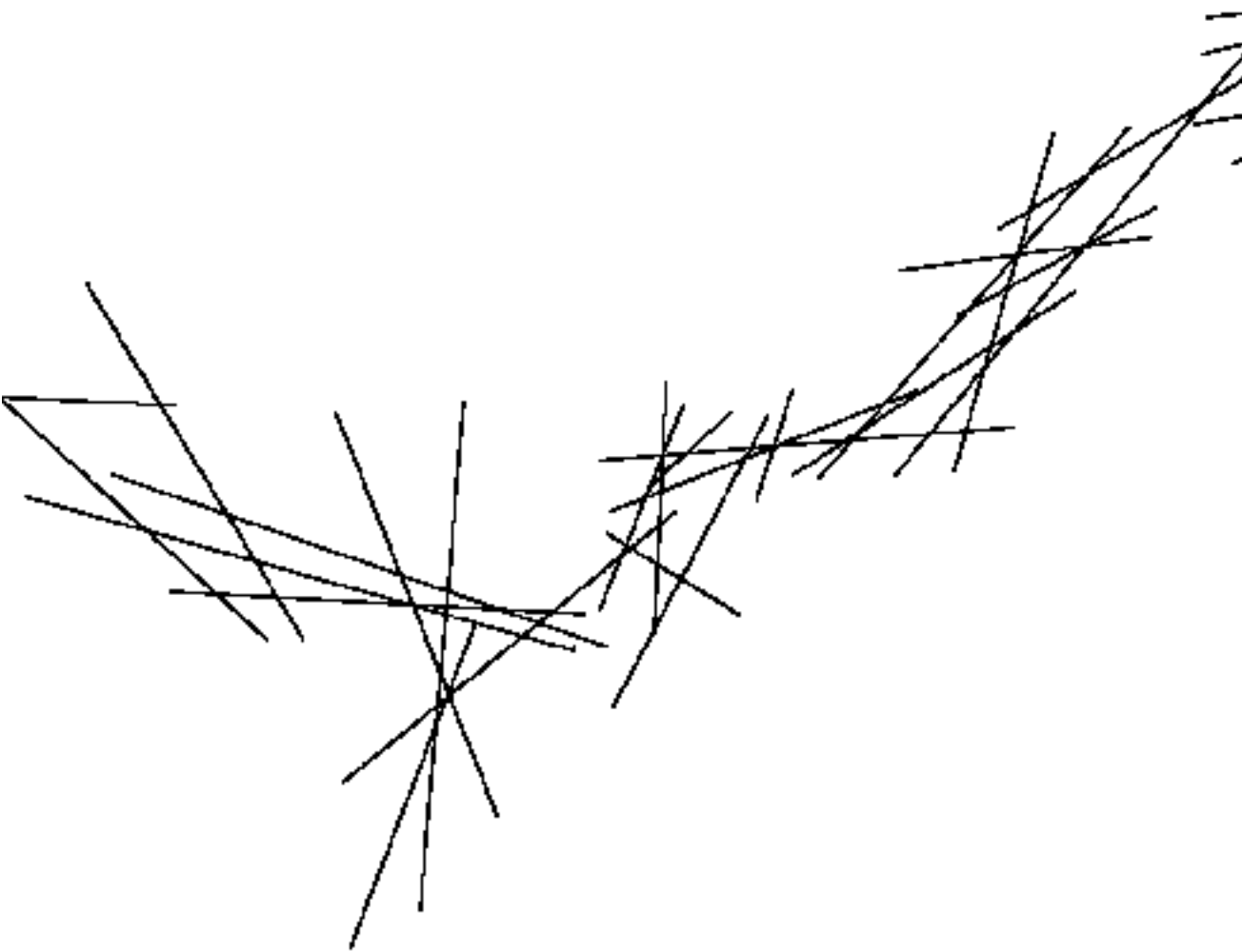
Ambience is music as a theatrical object.

LITERATURE

Michael Fried: "Art and objecthood", IN: *Artforum*, summer 1967

Torben Sangild: *Støjrock og Støjens æstetik*. To be published on Forlaget Multivers, fall 2002

Torben Sangild: *The Aesthetics of noise*. Datanom 2002
www.datanom.com/noise
ISBN 87-988955-0-8



NOISE, 'NOISALITY', NOSTALGIA

Electronic Listening Music as music of the contemporary

by Henrik Marstal
Musician, writer
and musicologist.
Since 2000 he has
published a
number of articles
and books on,
among others,
electronic music.

Translation:
Thorbjørn Tønder
Hansen

1) See Jakob Weigand
Goetz' definition and
discussion on page 13-
19.

**Sound is all our dreams of music.
Noise is music's dream of us.**

Morton Feldman

A guru once drew attention to the truth in the following wise words, "The moment you label something, it's the end." I have often thought about these words in connection with this essay. An essay on the practice of music labeled with the not all too precise generic term *Electronic Listening Music* or *ELM*¹ (by the way, how many generic terms on music are precise anyway?). The impossibility and absurdity of describing the ELM-scene as one – and when the space is as limited as here, inevitably painting with all too wide a brush – has an exact relation to the truth of the guru's words. Fundamentally speaking, the ELM-scene cannot be labeled a scene at all. It is no more a scene than the "rock-scene" has been throughout the years for example – and how much does Meat Loaf actually have in common with P. J. Harvey after all? But then again: On some crucial points, the ELM-performers on this scene or, more adequately, within this genre evidently *do* have a lot more in common with each other than with other electronic performers, for instance of Drum'n'Bass or Big Beat. Here, I will focus on the joint concerns rather than on the many differences on the ELM-scene – "the end" or not.

In particular, my thoughts on ELM have centered around some aesthetic positions within the genre that I find thought-provoking, and I would like to reflect a bit on them here. I will, however, refrain from concluding all too daringly, simply because the genre is still rather new and has no unequivocal characteristics. Furthermore, the aesthetics of the genre seem to contain a certain fragility corresponding to the sometimes almost transparent porosity of the music itself.

The first position concerns the musical material of ELM, where digital, droning and glitching noise sounds are used rather than tones. The application of these sounds may be a sign that we are slowly on the way towards understanding the everyday noise surrounding us as a particular *ambient* sound world, arisen as a consequence of the development of the Western World from an industrial society to an information society.

The second position deals more specifically with the relation of noise sounds to the outside world. As the connection to everyday soundscapes is close – due to the fact that noise sounds surrounding us are used in the music to a considerable extent – it does make sense to speak of a particular *noisality* rather than tonality in this music, at least in parts of ELM.

The third and last position has to do with ELM not only collecting its musical material and potential in the present, but also from the past. The reason is that in ELM in general – as a postmodern sound project – a “fragmented consciousness of tradition” is highly valued as in many other forms of contemporary music, especially within electronic music. Especially through sampling, elements from music of former times and operational sounds of older sound technology are here used as autonomous artefacts not necessarily expressing a continuous conscience of tradition, as it has often been the case in rock music, for example. Older, musical traditions live on in ELM as they have always done in music. In ELM however, the various traditions are not present as exclusive, definite continuations. Rather, the traditions are here primarily applied as retrospective relics of nostalgic character, and at the same time more or less legitimating the purely digital (and thereby non-analogue) project of ELM, in which the lap-top is the primary composition tool.

Hopefully, the outline of these more or less related positions will inspire the reader to reflect on this special practice of music, which at least to my ears represents some of the most listener-challenging and maybe even listener-suited music on the electronic music scenes today.

Noise as signal

ELM can more or less be characterised as an *atonal* kind of music. Not in the sense that was used to characterise Arnold Schönberg’s expressionistic works in the beginning of the 20th century, meaning music without a defined tonal center. No – dealing with ELM, I use the word atonal as a characterisation of a kind of music that either does not at all or only partly consist(s) of tones in the traditional sense of the word, i.e. sounds with clearly defined pitches produced on musical instruments. In general, the musical material of ELM only partly consists of tones in the common sense of the word – to a much higher degree, it consists of real and imitated noise sounds or digital machine sounds with indefinable pitches. When the performers of ELM *do* work actively with tonality, they often use tonal soundscapes produced on or sampled from synthesizers or pianos, with a distinct static character, only slowly or not at all transforming. At least this is the case in much of this music, as well as in Brian Eno’s ambient music that the ELM scene in general is largely indebted to. ²

Back in 1937, the composer and sound philosopher John Cage gave a lecture entitled “The Future of Music: Credo”, in which he among many other things reflected on the relationship between music and noise. Where we previously, he said, discussed the relationship between consonance (i.e. harmony) and dissonance – a completely

2) The undisputable, thorough influence of Brian Eno on the ELM-scene (just ask anyone of its performers!), both as a composer and as a thinker of music, is a subject which I unfortunately have no available space to elaborate on here.

3) John Cage: "The Future of Music: Credo", *Silence. Lectures and Writings*. Hannover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1973 (first appearance: 1961), p. 4. It is worth noticing that the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen has made a similar observation in his 1971-lecture "Four Criteria of Electronic Music" where he states that one of these criteria is exactly "the equality [...] of tone and noise" (see a transcription of the lecture in Karlheinz Stockhausen: *Stockhausen on Music: Lectures and Interviews*, compiled by Robin Maconie. London & New York: Marion Boyars, 1989, p. 88.

fundamental, essential relationship in the Western thinking of harmony and tonality – we will, in the near future, discuss the relationship between noise and so-called musical sounds.³ It is prophetic remarks as this one (yes, Cage probably was a prophet) that makes him the person whose thoughts on sound have probably been of the most fundamental importance in Western music since around 1960. This is because the prophecy of Cage to a great extent has come true, not only in relation to the postwar avant-garde music, but also in relation to popular music and its many electronic, derivative forms such as ELM. In rock music, for instance, there has been a tendency to gradually let the relationship between consonating and dissonating tones become more and more lenient. The reason is that music first and foremost has been understood as a *practice* without an explicitly defined set of rules like those that music theorists have applied to sheet music since the Middle Ages. On countless rock albums at least, apparently unmotivated and in a strict sense dissonant tone clashes can be heard, simply because singers have not always known or been able to hear what the others were singing. Furthermore, they sometimes changed their voices a bit, either because they were inspired or because they just really did not remember what they were singing the previous time the tune was played.

In recent electronic music, the relationship between consonance and dissonance has been even more lenient as a result of the use of pre-recorded borrowing of sounds (as in Hip Hop for example) and samples. Since the music is constructed (as it is often based on already-existing sound material) rather than being produced on the spot by live musicians, the juxtaposing of tonally colliding passages is much more frequent. A textbook example is heard on Tricky's "Feed Me" from the debut album *Maxinquaye* (Island Records, 1995), where the overall key (in the keyboards and melody) without doubt is G minor, while the sampled bass nevertheless consequently plays in A minor. To an analytical, trained ear, this piece of music sounds rather peculiar not to say completely wrong (!), with its two contrasting keys. But to Tricky, this contrast or rather juxtaposition may have formed some of the specific characteristics of the tune – and due to his possible lack of classical-theoretical training, he may not even have noticed that something could be wrong. Thus, the tune is not only an example of untrained performers enriching the music with new and surprising ideas. It is also an example of Cage's prophecy above stating that the relationship between consonance and dissonance is no longer something that is necessarily worthy of considerate attention. In rock music and especially in recent electronic music, Schönberg's vision of "the emancipation of dissonance" – that in the years during and after The First World War urged him to found the non-hierarchical twelvetone system in which the concepts of consonance and dissonance no longer really made sense – means something completely different than Schönberg himself, or his worst enemies for that matter, would ever have imagined.

Yet another matter has to be taken into consideration in relation to Cage's prophecy: The production of music by use of electronic sound

4) A similar practice can also be heard in the electro-acoustic music from the early 1950's onward.

5) Torben Sangild: *The Aesthetics of Noise*. København: Datanom, 2002, p. 6.

6) Considering that the use of musical instruments to produce noise primarily is a practice within electronic music (with outstanding exceptions, as for example Edgard Varèse's experimental and for his time very provoking piece exclusively for percussion, *Ionisation* (1930-31)), it is thought-provoking that the scholar Erich M. von Hornbostel as early as 1933 – four years before John Cage's ideas on music and noise were announced – suggested a very broad definition of the musical instrument. He said that everything intentionally able to produce sound should be regarded as an instrument. (see Klaus Wachsman et al.: "Instruments, classification of", S. Sadie (ed.): *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edition. London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 2001, vol. 12, p. 418). With this idea, Hornbostel renounced the differentiation between "tone" and "noise", and thereby he also dissociated himself from the traditional, sharp distinction between "music" and "non-music". Just like Cage's ideas, this definition thus points prophetically to the later practice of perceiving and using electronic technologies as musical instruments.

7) Simon Reynolds: *Blissed Out. The Raptures of Rock*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1990, p. 60.

8) Emmanuel Grynspan: *Bruyante techno. Réflexion sur le son de la free party*. Nantes: Mélaïne Seteun, 1999, p. 49.

technologies – the electric guitar, the possibilities of manipulating sound in studios, the sampler – has resulted in the music gradually becoming noisier. This is not only because of the physical sound-pressure itself in rock music for example. Also, the technologies used (amplifiers and effect pedals, for instance) are humming and noisy due to their electronic circuits. At the same time, tone-distortion has been an issue for rock guitarists since the mid-sixties, partly as a result of the emergence of distortion pedals. Rock music contains countless examples of guitar tones appearing with such distortive character that they have transgressed to almost just pure noise – where the original characteristics of the tones, especially the set pitches, are more or less blurred.⁴ The common use of distorted sound signals in rock music has since been taken up on in electronic music. The noise – that to traditionally thinking minds should be cut out from the tone and that which is "real" – has proved to contain a certain quality. In other words, the noise is legitimated as a signal.^{5, 6}

Perceived as noise music, ELM is just another of many examples within recent avant-garde and popular music aiming at systematising society's noise by forming it into an articulated expression so to speak. ELM is a contemporary noise genre primarily working with digital noise sounds, and their nature is not as brutal and aggressive as that of industrial noise for example. That is to say, with the digital epoch, a qualitative change of everyday noise sounds has taken place, transforming energetic and aggressive noise (factory noise, typewriter clattering) to softer and almost pleasant noise (computer humming, light sounds of copiers). In recent years, even means of transportation such as cars, airplanes and trains as well as kitchen appliances and white goods have become much quieter. Thus, noise as semantic signs now has another function than in older noise genres such as industrial, noise rock, heavy metal and parts of the electroacoustic music. Here, the implementation of noise has not only been perceived as a kind of "antithesis of meaning",⁷ but even also more specifically as a menace to the prevailing social order,⁸ or simply as a subversive factor of power.⁹ However, in the digital age of ELM, the application of noise should rather be understood as a sign of a new tolerance towards society: Using noise in the context of music is no longer necessarily a sign of resistance or subversion, but rather it is an accept of noise as a fundamental, ambient condition in the postmodern reality. Therefore, it is indeed tempting to understand ELM as a genre of music in which it is attempted to fully realise the aesthetic potential of everyday noise with the use of drowsy, meditative, densely encircling digital noise sounds – which we are familiar with in an everyday context and thereby also recognise in an artistic context.

It is exactly this condition that makes ELM genuinely contemporary; and the musical outcome of the genre may give us a hint that a paradigm shift in the general perception of everyday noise is on its way. In music of the 21st century, it is no longer as much about systematising noise to overcome it, but rather about realising it aesthetically: Noise is no longer necessarily something unpleasant,

9) Jacques Attali: *Noise. The Political Economy of Music*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1985. Translated by Brian Massumi. Original title: *Bruits: essai sur l'économie politique de la musique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977, pp. 6-9.

10) Roland Barthes: "The Grain of the Voice". *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana Press, 1977, pp. 179-89.

11) Henrik Marstal & Henriette Moos: *Filtreringer – elektronisk musik fra tonegeneratorer til samplers 1898-2001 [Filtrations – Electronic Music from Tone Generators to Samplers, 1898-2001]*. København: Høst & Søn, 2001, pp. 316-317.

12) Attali, p. 13.

13) *Ibid*, p. 33.

14) Henrik Marstal: "Harmonikkens enkelhed – enkelhedens harmonik. Droner og dronestrukturer i techno, metal rap og ny elektronisk folkemusik" ["The Simplicity of Harmony – the Harmony of Simplicity. Drones and Drone Structures in Techno, Metal Rap and New Electronic Folk Music"]. *Musik & Forskning* 25, 1999/2000, p. 132.

but with Roland Barthes' term, it has rather become "jouissance", i.e. exciting pleasure.¹⁰ In line with the development of the information society, the everyday working life, the well-being and the self-cognition of Western man are now to a larger extent connected to the quiet processes of digital technology. Thus, it is possible to imagine that the music of the 21st century will be connected to this humming to an increasing extent, while industrial noise, for instance, will cease to be an up-to-date musical element and instead take on nostalgic quality.¹¹ In other words, the subversive music that according to Jacques Attali always exists in society¹² will in the future no longer be found in the noise-based music such as industrial, heavy metal and hard rock. Noise – also in a musical sense – is always capable of destroying any social order and creating a new one on top of it, as Attali asserts.¹³ But what if noise, as a result of the changed character of our sonorous everyday life, in time is no longer tied to phenomenons such as power, control and social order? In that case, the destructive character of noise will change radically in both a physical and figurative sense, and it will contain a lot less striking power within art forms such as music. It is then easy to imagine that instead, future equivalents to performers such as Rage Against the Machine, Nine Inch Nails, Eminem and Slipknot will be likely to invent other, more up-to-date and thus more convincing ways of being subversive.

Drones and 'noisality'

ELM, like much other electronica, is a genre in which it is often a fundamental principle to make use of the so-called drone-lapse in the musical process. To the extent that the music consists of sounding tones, an underlying drone is often used as a common element. A drone is to be understood as a static, harmonic basis in the form of an identical keynote or sound constantly underlying the music, no matter what else is going on in it.¹⁴ As a concept, the drone dates back to traditional music, and throughout the centuries it has existed in the music of many different cultures, both within and outside the Western world. The best known example is probably the bagpipe, where there is always a long, extended keynote (or possibly several tones) underlying the melody. Among other drone instruments we find the Australian didgeridoo, the European hurdy-gurdy, the Indian sitar and the Jew's harp, known from various cultures.

In a lot of rock and soul, especially from the sixties, drone-like concepts are also used, where the harmonic basis remains the same throughout an entire tune. This is especially evident in the music of James Brown: The music is here often based on one and the same bass sequence – the bass guitar plays a short loop based on one chord that is then repeated ad infinitum. This is called a *groove* and signifies a chain of short, identical lapses in the music, on top of which the melody or other musical parameters can be shaped. In recent electronic music, this idea has also been taken up, as both techno, house and other related styles – such as ELM – are often based on short bass loops of one chord that are either copied on to

15) Ibid. p. 147.

16) Obviously, the word “noisality” derives from *noise* and has been construed for this occasion as a derivative of “tonality”. Transferred to French: *bruitalité* (a construed derivative of *tonalité*). To German: *Geräuschalität* (a construed derivative of *Tonalität*).

the computer or *looped* again and again.

A special phenomenological characteristic of drones is that they urge the listener to contemplation and trance – no matter whether the drones are realised on a bagpipe or in the form of electronically generated grooves at a rave. Since the chordial movement or development, which has indeed always been a particular aspect of European music, is either completely or partly absent (here, the only harmonic basis is the drone), this music – when the drones are combined with the underlying rhythm or beats – obtains a certain monotony. To a dancing listener this music will be experienced more or less as giving rise to trance.¹⁵ Especially in techno and related sub-genres, this is underlined by the absence of actual melodic patterns and by the music often being purely instrumental. One of the most important, ritual functions of the rave is exactly to carry the listener into a kind of trance, where the dancing interplaying with the music, the light show and the *partying* is the heart of the matter. In ELM, the drones serve a similar function of giving rise to trance, but the music does not in the same way incite physical movement. Its often scanty sound tracks, its use of irregular beats and breaks as well as the many noise elements makes it more suitable just to listen to, despite its often groovy character. In the state of listening, a completely different contemplation potential is thus implied. That is, the music calls for pensiveness, and with its “pleasant noise sounds”, it aims at tranquillising the mind, just as the *chill out*-genres of club culture mainly do.

A decisive and very interesting difference between ELM and techno for example, is that the grooves and loops used in ELM only partly consist of tones – rather, digital noise- or error-sounds are used in one way or the other. The sounds may be sampled, but often the sounds are produced by the artist himself by either taking the used digital computer technology to the limit or even misusing it, causing a number of error-sounds unpredictable from the outset, which are then subsequently applied as musical material. A common way to produce such sounds is for instance to sample the glitching and skipping sounds occurring when playing a CD that is prepared, i.e. scratched or painted on. We are thus dealing with a practice of music where noise sounds of every imaginable kind are used at least as much as tones or harmonic sounds. In some passages even, just various layers of noise sounds are used and then it is beyond sense to try and coin the term tone. When this is the case, the noise-sound music itself has drone-character, as the noise is static and does not change decisively. This kind of music has nothing to do with tonality. Instead, the organising principle underlying the music can be characterised using the more adequate term “noisality”.¹⁶ Just as in any form of tonality, the noise sounds are here in principle related to each other because of the context they are part of. Furthermore, one noise sound can be especially dominating, creating a hierarchical relationship between the sounds. This situation can also be related to the main principle of tonality, implying that all tones are hierarchically subordinate to the keynote (the note C in C major, for example).

17) Jonathan Cott:
Stockhausen:
*Conversations with the
Composer*, London:
Robson Books, 1974, p.
31.

Noisality as a concept is closely related to the everyday noise sounds, as modern man's daily soundworld is indeed perceivable as a chain of noisalities. Karlheinz Stockhausen once told of the exquisite delight being on board an airplane, listening to the inner vibrations of the engine sounds accompanying the plane on its journey through the air.¹⁷ It was in the late fifties, and Stockhausen was on tour in the United States giving lectures. Every day during the tour he had to fly from place to place, and the frequent flying within a short time frame affected his hearing sensitivity. Where other frequent flyers may not hear anything but a somewhat irritating noise drone of humming, monotonous motor noise, Stockhausen on the other hand heard a unique soundscape containing a myriad of micro-changes in frequencies, textures and sound intensity. In this to Stockhausen active listening situation – with a clearly Cage-like character – it does indeed make sense to perceive the plane's noise drone within the context of a well-defined noisality.

Putting oneself in Stockhausen's place to experience something similar only requires an ear adjustment to the situation – and obviously a plane is not needed. A car moving with constant speed will also produce a somewhat consistent and stable noise drone of an equivalent noisality, just as the vacuum cleaner, the fridge, the fan and the computer. In principle, the phenomenon is also present in nature, for instance in the roaring of the waves or in the wind in the trees. In our everyday life, we probably hear many more noise sounds than musical sounds, and when we actually do hear musical sounds, noise sounds are often forming an unavoidable accompaniment – as when the music from a car radio is mixed with the sounds of the driving car, or when the music on a stereo is mixed with ringing mobile phones or the traffic outside the window. Perceived in this way, music and noise in the technological society will always be directly related, just as Cage was anticipating.

In our everyday life we are thus surrounded by a lot more noisalities than tonalities, and with its noise drones and noise grooves, the ELM reflects this condition directly. In a way, ELM is able to tell us about ourselves in a much different and more decisive way than a lot of other music – and in fact, it may even be able to tell us a lot more than we would imagine, if we are actively listening that is. The dynamic relationship between art and life, which the original avant-garde artists were aiming at and which was also – to a certain extent – a goal for the Fluxus Movements, is also a relationship of great importance in music, especially in the event where everyday sounds in a concrete or stylistic sense have been applied as forming elements of the music. That this still takes place – with ELM as a current example – is a sign that we also need this relationship today in order to create meaning and coherence, not only in the art and the music surrounding and inspiring us daily, but definitely also in the sonorous everyday life we are all a product of, and live and die in.

Nostalgia as capital

In ELM, a typical preference of our time for a nostalgic use of frag-

18) See Andrew Feenberg: "Subversive Rationalization: Technology, Power, and Democracy". *Inquiry* 35/3-4, 1992, pp. 301-302. The article is reprinted in: Andrew Feenberg & Alastair Hannayh (eds.): *Technology and the Politics of Knowledge*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995.

ments from the entire history is present, and around the millenium it is also seen in popular music, visual art, literature, fashion and other areas, perhaps – as some scholars have noticed – as a consequence of and reaction towards late modernity's innumerable and rapid changings of our life conditions. Nostalgia – sometimes camouflaged as kitsch or *retro* – is these years a certain mode of being that many of us take up in order to stand the thought of *The New* at all. Not only the countless technological phenomenons popping up these years, such as mobile phones or the Internet, are new. So are the changed social relations, a consequence of technology's powerful impact on society.¹⁸ This process of development is forwarding faster than we can or will acknowledge, and here nostalgia functions as a filter, helping us in getting accustomed to the uncannily rapid progress of The New. Metaphorically speaking, we can imagine a human being of the present moving forward in such stiff headwinds that he has to walk with his back to the wind, thereby looking backwards, while the body is moving forwards. In other words, the faster The New manifests itself, the greater the need to look back.

The use of nostalgic elements in ELM is concise. The genre is partly seeking inward to the contemplative and pensive as well as partly being retrospective both in a mental and concrete historical sense. This last circumstance is especially thought-provoking: Why use computer technology to produce music, when the intention in the end is to give the music a nostalgic touch? One answer could be that the performers of ELM on the one hand find the artistic possibilities in using digital technology very promising, while they on the other hand – due to the contemplative quality of the music – make a virtue of the need for expressing the nostalgic as a special capital. In ELM this is done through a widespread and stylistic use of noise sounds from older sound technologies such as the gramophone or the tape recorder. Record surface noise is used a lot by many artists, and others equally work with the sound of a tape forwarding at a very fast speed. Thereby, these performers enter the tradition in recent music history of working with the sounds of technology *itself*, sounds that by contemporary standards are actually more or less perceived as *passé*. As late as the mid-eighties, these sounds were part of the everyday soundscape for all active music listeners – but now it is only so for record-*aficionados*, DJs or for the people still using the tape recorder in a listening or music-producing capacity.

The technological development has turned out to be irreversible: As is well known, we are now part of the digital age with no possibilities to return to the analogue age, where the electronic production of sound was not a question of binary systems, but of physical, magnetic marking of sound-storing-media such as the Long Playing record or the tape. But the longing for the former times is indeed present, and especially a longing for the completely unfathomable and maybe even magic sounds actually contained in the reeling tape recorder and the scratching pick-up – sounds that digital sound technologies such as the sampler, the computer, the sequencer and the software programmes so far do not match, with

19) Marstal & Moos, p. 280.

20) The internationally profiled Danish ELM performer Thomas Knak (aka Opiate) has for example often told of the enormous impact that the imagination of childhood and the playful approach to life has had on his own music. See the book by this author containing a conversation between the author and Knak, namely: Henrik Marstal: *Alt hvad musikken kan. Samtaler om musik og liv [All that Music can do. Conversations on Music and Life]*. København: Aschehoug, 2002, pp. 160-77, especially pp. 167-70.

the before mentioned use of glitches and skips as a possible exception. In sum: As working sound technologies, digital devices are simply not as charming as analogue devices. Even contemporary performers far away from the ELM scene are of the obstinate impression that analogue devices tend to produce a “warmer” or more “soul-endowed” sound than digital sound sources or effects. This is partly because the analogue technology is unpredictable, irregular and physically adaptive. To put it bluntly, they are simply more *human* than the rigorously predictable and precise digital technologies.¹⁹

All sound technologies thus contain a certain *historicity*, and the characteristic sound of record surface noise is for example a musical demarcation that to most adults is immediately associated with listening to LPs in former times. Many ELM performers are working with this historicity as an active tool – because for whatever reason, there is a special relationship between an inward position of contemplation and looking back in time using accessories of nostalgia. At least this is a relationship known in a lot of other Western music from Gustav Mahler to Steve Reich and also Arvo Pärt. Furthermore, nostalgia as a practice of music is also very common in popular culture, where it has a certain reflective function among grown-up listeners as “the sound of the good old days before the world went out of joint.” And as long as it looks as if digital technology has not in any way established its own historicity, the predilection for the sounds of older technologies will probably continue for a while yet within ELM – at least when the music as in ELM is produced by people whose earliest memories of music are connected to the sound of record surface noise and the reeling of tapes.

When all this is said, it also has to be emphasised that the use of record surface noise in ELM does not necessarily always have to be a sign of nostalgic dispositions. Exactly this sound is so common in ELM that it has become an indication of a style, a sound in its own right, a sound of which the use makes sense just because of its sonorous qualities and not necessarily as a consequence of its semantic content. Accordingly, the use of nostalgia is not necessarily a sign of a certain longing, not even when nostalgia is perceived as kitsch or retro. The use of it may also originate from pure curiosity or from the joy of “repeating” or simply imitating the sounds of the past, or perhaps from a wish to almost childishly play with sound in a totally non-committal way – also in an historical sense.²⁰ All in all, the nostalgic elements in ELM contain a duplicity of a certain complex kind, as the motives for using them are somewhat unclear, just as for the production of all art. With its noise-filled magic, ELM is also in this sense a very special, enigmatic kind of music that my reflections on these pages hopefully have not made all too enigmatic.