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On My Work
Jobs at AFA and EAI

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http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/image-sound_relations/sound_affects/

When I look back on the work [1] I've done there's really three phases: I grew up in New York City and when I was finishing college I was trying to figure out where to put my interests, which were literature, film and playing music and I played in kind of punk rock bands and rock bands from the late seventies on. One day a friend introduced me to Barbara London, the curator of video at the Museum of Modern Art, and suggested that I do an internship in video art. Through that I started to see work by artists such as Nam June Paik, Bill Viola, a Japanese Experimental Video Program, etc. When I left MoMA, I got a job at the American Federation of Arts (AFA), which distributed avantgarde films. As I had to sit there everyday and take care of these avant-garde films, I imagined music to the films, which I saw without hearing any sound. I had never been a particularly good musician (technically speaking), but I was really trying very hard—and I think that a lot of it is always trying in the wrong place …

As I started to imagine these soundtracks for Maya Deren films or Stan Brakhage films, a friend of mine loaned me a four-track tape recorder and I started to do some kind of imaginary or pretend soundtracks.After about a year and a half I got another job at Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), which is the leading distributor of video art, perhaps in the world. They represent many of the leading video artists. There I started to do research and I learned that a great deal of the artists that I was most interested in who were doing video art—which I thought of from the framework of visual art—had come out of music backgrounds. It was then that I really started to understand video art as an audiovisual medium.

Collaborations with Tony Oursler

I started to make friends with artists and Tony Oursler was the first who asked me to show him my work. I think he knew about it because nobody just works as a distributor, it's this thing that most people in administration are doing something else too. And I gave Tony some four-track tapes, these short instrumental pieces. I didn't hear from him for a long time; I started to curse his name and think, you know, that bastard, he doesn't even want to tell me that it's bad. When at some point I was staying at my friend's house and I got a call about one in the morning. I picked up the phone: Hello! I said.—It's beautiful! Let's go to Holland!—and he invited me to work on a four-channel video and sound installation. I didn't even really know what a four-channel video installation was, but I thought, well, he is one of my favourite video artists, it's okay. He was working on a piece called «Crypt Craft» (1989), it was a room about five by four metres, and I kept trying to make a song for the room. He would say: No, you've got to think about the piece itself, which is about toxic histories and haunted memory, haunted rooms, and you've got to think about the room as a place, not as a place to put your song. And slowly, slowly, slowly I started to get it. I did four different pieces of music, each with some silence, each with a different speed, each not in perfect key or pitch to each other and suddenly I saw how they came to life in the room with these images; and that it was not about me or my song or him or his images, but it was about what met in the middle. And I continued to work with Tony for several years, among other video artists; I did about a hundred soundtracks for film, video

and dance for different artists in the nineties. Tony is most famous for his projection works from thelast 10 years or so, which are often these dolls, and it's usually a woman's face projected on to a cloth doll. Many of the famous dolls are my wife, Tracy Leipold. She's a performer, mostly known for working as an interpreter. Tony videotapes her very tight with her hair pulled back and then projects her back on to these dolls and she's crying and screaming and simulates orgasms and is going crazy, speaking in tongues or various character voices.

The history of video is connected to sound

I think it's critical that the history of video is really connected to sound and in a successful video work, sound and image are very hard to differentiate, or perhaps better: it is hard to imagine the presence of one without the other. The soundtrack is deeply connected to the images, editing and all. When you look back on a lot of work and a lot of the people who created some of the first videos— especially with image processing, not so much the performance or conceptual people —there are a lot of people who are coming from electronic music. Nam June Paik was a musician before he was a video artist, Steina Vasulka was trained as a classical violinist and Woody Vasulka had worked with electronic music, Bill Viola worked with David Tudor on the »Rain forest«, an amazing sound sculpture and Tony Oursler had also played music. He was in a band with Mike Kelley called The Poetics and he played drums with Laurie Anderson when he was in college, but I think he told me she fired him because he had bad rhythm. Paik has described this idea of playing images with his hands and fingers the way that he had played sounds on a piano or audio synthesizer. Another artist whose work I really loved was Jem Cohen. Jem was collaborating mostly with rock'n'roll groups such as REM and others and doing these sort of experimental music videos and we worked on several projects and some concerts together.

I guess that for me being a musician, starting to work with video artists actually became very natural in that; many of the artists that I was gravitating to already had a musical quality to their work. And I've never done a traditional soundtrack, I've never gotten a project where someone had a finished edit and said: here, put music on top of it. It's always been: someonehas an idea, maybe they have some images, I start to create sound, they might even shoot while listening to my sound. Often, working in parallel, with a constant exchange. They might come in the recording studio and make comments and I might be part of shooting the image and in the end there is some kind of really tight collaboration in which image and sound come together. And it's a luxury: I could never do this, if I was to work in a commercial area; but working with artists, especially artists that I like, and that I have collaborated with once and it went well, we tend to go on again and again.

Sound affects everything you see

Most traditional ways of working put all of the priority on the image. There are so many projects where people work for months and months on the image and then, well, they're out of money, they're out of time and they need sound quickly. It's also the way that audiences respond; as soon as you put a picture up the image becomes dominant and sound becomes background in many people's minds. I'm personally interested in ways that sound and image can go back and forth between foreground and background. Especially with experimental work there are times in which the image should almost drop out and a sound should come forward and there are other times when a sound should drop back. It's very different compared to classic cinema sound, where—except for the rock songs—it's more to be felt and not heard. I mean, there are times I really want you to hear and there are other times where I'm conscious of a kind of scooping back underneath so that the sound might be more felt than heard. And sound affects everything you see. I did a soundtrack once for a videoartist named Seoungho Cho and someone wrote an essay about it and described the videotape which was a fairly abstract image and ambient soundtrack: there is no acting, there is no story, there are not any actors. The writer only focused on the images: She talked about it as very brown and dark and depressed and slow. Sometime

after she wrote this, we realised that the soundtrack wasn't working very well—for Cho or for myself; we saw it at a couple of festivals and it was like, well, that's kind of depressing. I did a new soundtrack and the woman saw the video again and she said: Wow, youknow, this is different than I remember! This is firey and sexy—I don't remember it being like this! But what she didn't understand was that the sound had changed and the sound was affecting how she related to the image. She didn't even have the language in which to speak about sound.

A language for sound

We are finally getting to a point of developing a language for sound, but a lot of it is related to film. There is a conference in London called "The school of sound" and for example Michel Chion, the French theorist will speak and Walter Murch, the great film sound designer will speak. But it's very much about sound in relation to cinema and again: I think it's very different when you speak about sound in relation to video art or in relation to new media. So I think there are really only a few people who have even attempted to speak about and to describe sound in relation to video. An interesting thing for a collaboration between me and another artist is the way that we start to try to find a common vocabulary. With Eder Santos, a Brazilian video maker, we've done over 40 projects together. Even though we live so far away, there is just some kind of mutual telekinetic connection; he can call me from Brazil on a car phone and say: I am doing a video about Amsterdam and water and it will be very fast and nervous! And I think, okay, I know what it's going to look like exactly from his point of view and he's already got sounds of mine in his head. None of our projects are the same, but it's like a blind date. You meet somebody and you start to think: Do we have some common language? For example, you work with someone who's saying: can't you make that guitar sound like a cymbal? What does that mean? Or: Can you make it more blue? And »blue«—just somebody might mean the blues, somebody also might mean depressing, somebody might mean Derek Jarman's film «Blue»… And then you build on that language or it's a bad date and you give up. But sometimes the bad part of it creates attention and that critique presents something interesting too. Everybody's vocabulary is different and the vocabulary you create is always unique to the collaborative process.

Collaboration and hierarchy

The question of collaboration and hierarchy really is kind of a core question. I really think that everything I know as an artist came through collaboration—but where you have to be very careful is: just set terms of collaboration as early on as possible. The reason ultimately I think I stopped collaborating so much with visual artists is there was always this hierarchy. I had a big argument with an artist who I was close to just before a performance of music and video projection. He said: You have to change the music, these are my images! I said, well, no, this is our thing! But, even on these collaborations someone says, let's work on this project!—and I make music, fully of my own conception, they make edits to my sound and create the structure and in the end it's still a video tape by them, music by me. And this is hierarchy and it's a hierarchy of the same people who came back to me and said: Oh, my video tape won first prize at this festival and I'm thinking: wasn't that our project? The problem of hierarchy is basically that most experimental video art is treated in the framework of visual arts.

I don't think that in video art the structures of the market avoid collaborations as much as in video clip production or commercial cinema. There is definitely a more loose structure in terms of business, which can be determined project by project. With a lot of video art collaborations money is much less important—sometimes I'm paid, sometimes I trade for services, sometimes, when I used to be in bands, someone would say, would you make me music, and I'd say, okay, then would you make a video clip for my band.

Learning from Fluxus

I've been very lucky throughout my life that I've met some amazing people and a lot of times

before I even knew who they were. When I was at EAI, Nam June Paik lived very close by and he would come in and he would look at me and just ignore me and walk away. After three years of being at EAI he came in one day and there was a video by Peter Callas, an Australian video artist, on the monitor. He laughs and says: Oh, very good, what is that? And I said: It's Peter Callas and it's my music. He looked at me and he said: Okay, we go to Blimpy's! Blimpy's is this terrible American sandwichfastfood shop and he took me to Blimpy's and said: You are a musician, you call Mr. Bad Brain—which was The Bad Brains, an amazing post-punk rock band –, ask them to play with me and video of Joseph Beuys, ok, good luck!

And it began then what ended up being our twelve-year work together. I never worked as one of Nam June Paik's studio assistants but he put me even in credits as a collaborator. And at times I've made music for him and other times I've made video and other times I've worked as his archivist. But generally he had me work on things that weren't the things that I wanted to do or knew how to do well. At one point he said: There is a Fluxus festival starting tomorrow, one month of Fluxus performances. You videotape every night! And I said: I'm a musician, I don't have a camera, I don't even know how to use one! And he said: No, no, no, this will make you a better musician! And he was right, exposing me to Fluxus, a whole other kind of performances, learning to use a video camera, learning to look in different ways, connected to my listening.

On the drive home from his «Concert with The Bad Brains» and the video of Joseph Beuys (1991) he gave me a little bit of a tutorial: With this event, he said, I tried to cross time and space and I brought Joseph Beuys from the dead into the living, and from Germany into New York, from old school into new school and I tried to bring The Bad Brains' young audience into my world. It was an amazing experience to see and hear him performing with this incredibly intense loud band. He had his piano upside down and was hitting it with a hammer and every five minutes he would check his watch and he'd go up and say: Okay Mr. Bad Brain!—, and he'd take them all off the stage, no matter where they were in the song and they would put the guitars down and would go off the stage and he would leave Joseph Beuys's howling image and sound on the screen for five minutes. He checks his watch again; Okay Mister!—, and he takes them back on the stage. He was editing live on stage. And that's even true for the way that I've seen him edit videotape, it was like watching someone play the piano insanely. He would put several videotapes on several decks and have a switcher and he would just be tapping up this musical rhythms bringing each tape in and out of the visual frame.At the end I remember saying to Nam June: Should we fix those edits? - and he said: No. It's finished. It was a performance and that's how it will remain. So he was tapping on the edit buttons: in-out-in-out-in-inin- out-out-out etc. and that was it and it was amazing deliberating. First of all it was like watching someone play music. I've learned so much from him and this appreciation I have for collaboration directly comes from him.

Performance

It was also something that I learned a lot about: a performance of a thing being an acceptable thing, that a lot of what you study and a lot of what you practise and a lot of what you learned, when it comes down to it, you get up in front of a group of people or in front of pieces of equipment and what people experience is this process of creating. So when I do my own performances, a lot of what you see is me sort of trying to put the whole thing together. I have about ten CDs of music by me or collaborations with other artists and musicians, but there is not a single song or composition that I can really re-create—it's always about a relationship: either a relationship with the space and improvising to the acoustics of the space or it's just about a kind of dialogue with another musician created live. It's very similar to some of the dialogues I created with visual artists. I never did any kind of completely audio-visual projects alone, because—when working at the EAI, I was so exposed to the history of video art and I was so aware about what others did and I felt like: I can't begin as a new visual artist. And I just knew I had something unique with sound that comes out; when I start to make pictures I immediately

feel, I'm forcing it. I can work very hard on sound, but I also feel like it's much more my own voice.

Installations

More permanently are my installations and again it's a dialogue with the space. The first installation that really broke through for me was developed that way: I had a studio in the World Trade Center on the 91st floor of Tower One for six months in 1999 («World Trade Center Recordings: Winds after Hurricane Floyd, »WorldViews Residency, Open House, 1999, Diapason, NY, 2001, The 2002 Whitney Biennal, 2002). What Irealised I was doing was creating a relationship between the image beyond the windows and what was going on on the outside and bringing that sound inside. It again was an audiovisual work that seemed like video or cinema but it was a live environment and I was bringing my own knowledge of sound in a kind of relationship or sensitivity to the image and space. At the end of the residency after six months we had an exhibition and the people came to the studio and saw what's outside and the sound triggered live what was heard in the room. When it was purchased, it was the first sound artwork purchased by the Whitney Museum in 30 years. They got a single photograph of my studio and then the sound in a surround-sound mix. I went into the basement of the Whitney, where the technical people with the white gloves hang out and they said to me: How should we treat this photograph, is that the artwork? and I said, no, it's the documentation, the artwork is the sound; but when you exhibit it, my idea is that it's a very dark room where you see the photograph as a reference to the windows, but then you really eventually close your eyes and listen. I recently went to the Brazilian Amazon and did recordings with a group of Yanomami Indians for an exhibition in Paris at the Cartier Foundation («Yanomami: Spirit of the Forest,» Fondation Cartier, Paris, 2003). The piece is presented in a dark room in the museum, but I'm still relating out to the context of the whole exhibition, which is about the Yanomami Indians. Even when I do works that are so-called purely sound I'm aware that they are always sound in relation to a context, which is generally an architecture—a gallery space, etc.

Internet

I have also done work for the Internet (see e.g. «Tetrasomia» 2000). The internet projects are really thinking about the web as an environment for sound—like archives that exist online of environmental sounds; the interest of going to the Internet and listening to the ocean or listening to birds and frogs; and also thinking about what makes people create these archives. There is one archive that I found of a guy who only records sounds of poisonous frogs or there's a religious site where the guy just records thunderstorms and you can go there and listen tothunderstorms, but for him it's his connection to God. So this idea of what we listen to and also why we make it public is very interesting to me and how do you consider the internet as a place for listening, especially to a natural sound when it's appealing a natural environment.

[1] Notes taken from a public talk series concerning the topic of Image-Sound-Relations at the Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig (Datum), moderated by Dieter Daniels.