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Neo-Slacker And Other Stories
Nobody Likes The Records That You Play
Letters to Mart 1

For some reason, watching Artjom Astrov's videos reminded me of slacker, the pop culture phenomenon of the early 1990s. The most well-known representative of this was certainly the band Nirvana. Wikipedia says, among other things, that slacker is characterised by "apathy and aimlessness". For sociologists who like binarisms, the faded mentality of the slacker (Nirvana's first album was called *Bleach*) countered the hypertrophied and shoulder-padded achievement culture of the 1980s as represented by money, corporate suits, conservatives, cocaine, Thatcher-Reagan, glitz, etc.

If the 1980s generation was always short on time, then slackers had it in abundance because they didn't go to work or, if they did, they went to a fast-food restaurant (at least according to the image of the slacker that we encounter in the cult MTV series *Beavis and Butthead* from the 1990s or in the works of Canadian writer Douglas Coupland's *zeitgeist* novel *Generation X*). Their time may have manifested itself in a certain materiality, in which it is possible to perceive duration, acceleration and deceleration, perhaps even stillness.

What probably distinguishes Astrov's post-, neo- or meta-slacker, if you like, from its 1990s counterpart is that they can quote Oriental philosophers or Bergson or Deleuze in their perceptions of the flow of time. In addition, they are probably not characterised by apathy or aimlessness, but by something that only the uninitiated would recognise as such.

Artjom Astrov has also spoken of his work in terms of something he has called "deep hanging out". This is the kind of hanging out where the participant doesn't just hang out, but does so in a "deeper" way, which can probably also be equated with usefulness. It doesn't just move horizontally, which might characterise a regular hanging out, but can also have a vertical dimension.

I believe that these three scratchedelic videos can also be seen in the context of deep hanging out. In the first, we encounter a hip-hop-like, looped treatment of time. In the second, wood is burning in a fireplace (I guess?). It's like an avant-garde version of the TV show with a fireplace. The fire is accompanied by Erik Satie-esque minimalist contemplative music where something seems to be amiss. A kind of visual contemporary muzak.

In the third video, we encounter the setting sun on an urban horizon, seen through the vibrating strings of a guitar. This is accompanied by guitar strumming that, in its "apathy and aimlessness", is reminiscent of a band from the early 1990s on the Sub Pop label (Nirvana also started out with them).

Placing the camera in the soundhole of the guitar created an interesting effect. As if the gaze "from elsewhere" is automatically the gaze of the Other. We are being watched from where we don't expect. Perhaps it's the gaze of a punishing Judeo-Christian God telling us we've played the fool enough; it's time to pull ourselves together and take action.

Dear Artjom,

I hope you do not take this letter as rude or overly obsessive. In fact, it is quite the opposite. I am here to deeply – both artistically and personally – investigate the relationships between your work and me.

You see, I am a *bad* reader of art. I always want to understand my relation to the work rather than what it is actually about. So, it is hard for me to read your art separately from those crumbles that I have come to know of you. It has always been hard for me to draw that line between artistic practice and life. Isn't good art just a side effect of our lives, a formalised expression of our daily practices that leaks into the money-making art-world-system?

A sunset, strings of the guitar slowly bouncing. I'd like to believe that this song was not made to be an artwork, but instead became one in its second life. *Who did you play this song to?*

I think of our first encounter years ago. A football match in Milan at the San Siro stadium. I don't know much about football, but I was accelerated by the fact that I can pretend to have an interest in it. Because I found you attractive. I try to look at it in the same way you would. I focus on the sound of the match, the echoes, the chants, the harmonies in the screams. Is it an acoustic experience for you, too? *Do these moments ooze into your artworks?*

The ball chase is followed by a walk on the streets of early spring Milan, cold. We talk, I try to understand you, the way you work. I want to learn from you. We pass through a bar and have some banter with a woman who grew up in Tallinn. She is drunk. You two speak Russian and I sip my cocktail in silence. I wonder if the linguistic gap alters our realities, separates them? When we part ways in the early morning hours, I have your songs on repeat on SoundCloud, Bandcamp, whatever platform googling your artist names leads me to. Trying to listen to what you're saying, hoping to understand the way you think about the world, *including me*, by entering your music.

Your work is a collage that brings back memories, not only those of you, but others, too. A flame that burns on my face, and ultimately on yours, too. *Is everybody who gets touched by your work as flammable as I am?* I feed a horse in the streets of Vienna, you take me to a gallery showcase that I find too conceptual, empty. Not my taste. Your films don't show in a gallery, but still I leave the show asking myself: *was this a mysterious collage for art's sake or a practice of life that I do not belong to?*

Sincerely,

eva & mia

The film *Juice* (1992) is about a gang of four boys growing up on the streets of Harlem – facing daily discrimination and racism; spinning and stealing records; preparing for a DJ contest – all the former while looking for some serious Juice. On the streets (of 90s Harlem) it stands for respect. As currency, as social capital, as the highest value. Artjom Astrov's graphic score insists more of it – Got Juice? Disregarding the title, the 90s hip hop touch – the sample, the scratch, the beat – is just a single element of the audiovisual collage of three videos.

Thesis: “Nobody likes the records that you play” *is a sample taken from the same movie. In the scene, Queen Latifah is lashing out at a young thug whose mixtape, submitted to a DJ contest, is not only lame but nobody likes his records either.* Antithesis: *In “Nobody likes the records that I play”, usually the “you” in the sample is altered to a simultaneous “I”.*

Astrov's retrospective emphasis on the physicality of raw materials – likewise the constraints they entail – resembles the methods and avant garde qualities of sound collages from *Musique concrète*. Emerging in the 1940s in France, a type of experimental composition utilising everyday objects and sounds as raw material through tape manipulation and audio signal processing, it pioneered the BBC Radiophonic Workshop (Oram, Derbyshire) and everything that followed in experimental and electronic music. Astrov edits the cuts and works with the montage in a digital space, as if the timeline of a video would have a material passivity of an analogue carrier; or a linearity of a magnetic tape to be manipulated; cut and pasted; glued back together, so that eventually, for the final recording, all three tapes can be played back at once.

Synthesis: “The records are ok; solid; krđi normaalne” *synthesis of these two polarities would be a neutral Ok – “the records are fine; ok”. Unless purely technical, that's as far as the words, expressing the like and the dislike, get. In fact, the more one aims to describe the psychosomatics of sound, the more distant, trivial or major cringe the experience itself gets.*

The resting potential of a cell membrane is between 0.7 and 2.5 Hz and the action potential frequencies have been measured up to 200-300 per second (Hz). If the electromagnetic fields of bodies, the body acoustics, could be made audible, then the frequencies of Astrov's gang, the fictional band of three, would amount to perfect white noise.

Hello, Mart,

They say there is room in New York filled with a bluish-pink soft light from floor to ceiling, where year after year there is only one sine sound wave, one tone, one rising and falling twang. Something like a fan or the whining sound of a kitchen appliance, but still pleasant to listen to. You can go into that space, you can be there, hang out, relax, maybe even sleep. It's a place in the middle of a city of millions of people, an opportunity to step away from the noise, to stop and connect... but with what?

Anyway, it seems to me that something like this could also happen in Artjom Astrov's artwork, an installation exhibited in the basement of Hopner's House, Tallinn. There are three videos, each with its own focus and purpose: one chops up the sound into pieces, another one is having fun with the sound, and the third one exposes the physical shape of the sound (or the vibration of the guitar strings) from the perspective of the guitar itself.

I was wondering how to give you the best overview about this spatial experience, how to capture Artjom's vibe - and I suggest you do this: turn on the electric heater, the one that stands under the window of your office space. Turn it up to the maximum, turn it up so that the heat is blazing. Listen! The heater crackles, scraunches and crunches, it struggles against the cold that invades the room, but it wins and the warm air fills the room. It feels nice. Find that very vinyl in the cupboard that will always repeat that one particular moment. Listen to how that repetition distorts, chops, cuts the lyrics. And finally, ask your neighbour living downstairs (the one who plays the piano all the time... unfortunately) to try the guitar for a change. Let him move his fingers boldly across the strings, you just listen. And then - hang out there!

The world of strange sounds here in Tallinn, in the basement of Hopner's House, can also be found. Where can art be found here? In my opinion, it seems to be about directing attention, directing it to listen to the sound, its various forms, interruptions, cut-outs, refractions, blendings with reality. Artjom is not showing us someone else's life, some other political possibility or alternative history, but the strangeness, the oddness, the otherness of the world around us. The world (of sound) in which we could live, if only we paid attention to it.

Until tomorrow,
Oliver

* *Letters to Mart* presents my attempt to explain to my blind friend living in Central Estonia what can be heard, seen and experienced at the 9th Artishok Biennial. If he cannot make it to the biennial, the biennial has to be brought to him.

How did this artwork make you feel?

☐ Happy ☐ Surprised ☐ Wiser

☐ Indifferent ☐ Sad ☐ Angry

☒ Other:

Like in that mental state where you are caught between FOMO and contentment after having dozed off in your rocking chair, with the cat on your lap, on a Friday evening.

Like when you were a kid trying to learn Queen songs on the xylophone.

Like when you accidentally sense a familiar scent from ages ago, and try to recall its origins.

Like in a conversation where you would like to turn on the subtitles.

Like when you enter an empty tram on Midsummer's Eve and are face to face with a seagull.

Like when you wake up in your own bed after having fallen asleep somewhere else.

Old towns across Europe are experiencing a similar pattern of decay. The former seed of life, the place where the city emerged, is being drained of life and joy. Tallinn is no exception. Its Old Town is mainly brought to life by tourists, whose numbers have declined significantly in recent years. The Old Town, the pride and glory of Tallinn, is not really known by foreigners, and for local people it has become alien.

The amount of empty spaces in the Old Town is a testament to this. But if a building is not in use, there is no life or hope. This year's Artishok Biennial could just as well be the discovery festival for the city. How often, for example, is it possible to find yourself, either accidentally or deliberately, in the basement of a building in the Old Town that has been closed for a long time?

Artjom Astrov's triptych of videos gives plenty of reasons to do so. The artist has created three atmospheres of sound in an abandoned place that used to be a restaurant.

Visualised music leads from the birth of electronic sound to the acoustic, personal, even romantic moments. All of this adds a special character to the space, whereas the sounds shape the space, slowing down, giving time to moments while creating a dialogue between the historic building and the present.

The work, which consists of three videos, interweaves the following elements: sound, the initial impulses behind the artwork, and also the sense of place and intimacy that fits into everyday space. Artjom's work creates a bridge and a dialogue between space and sound, but it also highlights something else. For example, one could discuss the interim use of empty spaces to help a space remain vital until a permanent solution is found. The empty rooms of the Old Town in Tallinn could have more use similar to what Artjom has created. With his installation, the artist poses questions about the nature of space and the related preconceptions. Would we have a different approach towards the artwork if it was exhibited in a gallery? Would the knowledge that we are in an institutional space make us somehow especially tense? There is a special, shifted atmosphere in the basement of an Old Town house that has not been designed for art exhibitions. An atmosphere that is liberating and creates intimacy, something that cannot be achieved in a public space.

More than anything else, it's a sort of warmth that slowly takes over my body, starting at the shoulders and spreading evenly everywhere. My legs and hands become heavy, as if I was drained out of my body and then filled with fine sand or salt. The warmth feels safe but then I get scared: what if I can't move myself any longer.

Before finishing this thought, I find myself in a hallway; I don't know in which house, city, century or world it's situated, but it feels familiar in the sense that it's an ordinary hallway. It's dim. A red lacquered handrail. I go upstairs and continue along the corridor, on and on and on; I hear voices, a warm light shines in the distance. I reach the door, no, I just suddenly find myself already in the next room. It's very warm, but not suffocating; it's the warmth of fire.

The large room with low ceilings is filled with people, and I'm convinced that I know them, but I can't see their faces. It's as if their faces were blurred, and at the same it feels like they are looking and smiling at me; but the next moment they have already dissolved. When I look at them, then just for a moment or rather for a hundredth of a moment before actually seeing them, I almost catch a glimpse of them. A moment of foresight. But by the time my gaze actually reaches them, their faces have already faded away. Even in the haze of my dream, I remember that I was once told that everything I see takes place in the past.

Standing at the threshold, I do not dare go any further; I'm not afraid of these faceless people, instead I
what then

I guess, it's that sound. Because I don't understand where it's coming from. It's all-encompassing and I think it comes from inside of me: that it's the sound of my rushing blood, but I don't think blood should make this kind of rustling sound. Maybe it comes from the floor and spreads through my feet. A tactile sound. When I get this, I close my eyes and start slowly moving. I get more used to it, become bolder. I feel the beat, feel the faces. My fingers, knees and tips of my hair recognise every person in this room. I start running and I run

and I run

and I run, the space and the people and the warmth disappear, I run against the wind. I open my eyes and find myself standing on the roof of an unknown building in an unknown city. The sun is either setting or rising. It's setting and rising.

mia maria rohumaa

There is increasing talk of reclaiming Tallinn's Old Town for the local people. With the relocation of many government offices, museums and theatres, there are fewer and fewer reasons to visit the Old Town. However, the Hopner House, located in the absolute epicentre of the Old Town, Town Hall Square, is one of the – already relatively few – places where locals from different generations and communities can meet for various events or hobby groups.

The building's history is legendary; after restoration in the 1980s, it became the home of Tallinna Matkamaja (Tallinn Travel House). At the same time, the Old Town was making a comeback, which coincided with the burgeoning interest in the past and heritage in the late Soviet period. Some researchers have even said that the Old Town was "in fashion". In any case, extensive restoration also meant that by the 1980s the Old Town had taken on a much more medieval appearance. Until the early 1990s, the building was a hive of activity, with several types of travel specialists and committees working there, and an average of 300 groups a year being sent on challenging category hikes. The building also housed a travel- and hiking-themed library. However, while hiking was a popular sport during the Soviet era, its popularity collapsed with the Soviet regime and the need for the Travel House disappeared.

In recent years, the Old Town has once again seen vacancies, this time in the commercial sector. Many of the restaurants, hotels and souvenir shops that sprang up in the Old Town in the post-Soviet era have closed. The pandemic and later the war, which led to a decline in tourism and a general economic recession, have taken their toll. The face of the Old Town has begun to change again with a steep rise in abandoned, empty, unused spaces. The windows of AirBnB apartments are often dark. While the Old Town had a population of 11,000 in the 1950s, there are now only about 2,500 inhabitants.

Using a commercial space in the Hopner House, which has been empty for some time, Artjom Astrov's installation reveals the potential hidden in the Old Town's empty spaces. Video and audio provide an excuse to come together. The installation created in the premises of the Travel House invites people to gather around a kind of campfire. One of the videos even shows a burning fire and flames climbing up the listeners' heads. One of the most meaningful places for such gatherings is the Old Town, which perhaps needs the people more than they need it.

linda kaljundi

Dear Artjom -

How well do you remember our first meeting at the party in Anu and Lieven's studio? I wonder if you also remember that surprisingly quickly we got into a deep conversation about sound art, both my own activities and yours? And did you know that there's a picture of us talking in which my face looks like you're explaining the meaning of life to me? You can guess - confusing or not?

How about we start with the basics? And go deeper and deeper?

How many hours did it take to create these works? I understand that you already had most of the videos on your hard drive, right? And the score you start the *Juice* video with is from 2022, or did you just make it up?

What similarities do you see between these three videos? These colours? The repetition of elements until they are cancelled? (Were they eventually cancelled?) The pairing of sound and image, sometimes juxtaposed as counterpoints? The fun of experimenting and the confidence that the viewer or the writer will be able to conjure up some correlations between them? Did you trust that maybe just chance and a fragment of a concept would be enough, and the rest would find its place? (Seek and ye shall find?)

Are you ready for the next stage?

What do you think - what kind of people would be interested in your work? Sound people and young artists like you, the ones who like to poke around in all sorts of programs and press buttons to see what happens? Those for whom art is a by-product of everyday life, maybe even a record of it? Does that give you confidence in the value and significance of the material sitting on your hard drive? Who should be able to read it? Those who are not in a hurry?

And maybe it would be a good idea to move to the third level now? Do you want to?

Perhaps you could tell me: what effect do you think your work has on the person who experiences it? What is the purpose of this game? And what are the demands, the hard questions that you have asked yourself in creating this work? How can we know that our work here, our reflection on it, our in-depth analysis could bear fruit at all? Are you worthy of our great effort?

What is your relationship to precision, articulation and the cruelty required to make a decision? Where is the line between artistic ambivalence and cowardice?

Sincerely, Sanna

sanna kartau

Artjom Astrov's installation combining three videos is "manipulative" in its structure. I am not using this word here in a judgmental way (though I wouldn't see any harm in that either), but rather in a technical sense. Astrov manipulates reality and does so on two levels. The visual level uses the logic of a microscope. We are shown both small details and larger plans, sometimes from a very demanding angle; in the second video, when we are shown a close-up of logs burning in the fireplace, it gives rise to even some slightly disturbing hallucinations - a similar effect to examining a plain natural object with a microscope. In music, the used model is repetition, which is in fact a cousin of the microscope method. The sound phrases - both electrical and acoustical, all slow-acting - become entangled within themselves. It's better if you know how to concentrate, but even that doesn't actually guarantee what we've come to think of as enjoyment.

tõnis kahu

