

Coincidences and Decisions

Max Gansberger talks with artist and musician Reni Hofmüller about her recent sound installations and art projects.

Max Gansberger: How do you develop a new composition? What is your mode of operation?

Reni Hofmüller: Sometimes I work along a specific topic; sometimes there is an open situation where I can develop a new sound piece or project on my own terms. I like both frameworks and find them inspiring. The confrontation with new themes is challenging; to work completely out of my own set of ideas is a pleasure.

MG: I find that too. It is a huge act of confidence from the organiser to leave all decisions about material, media and realisation of a piece to the creator.

Reni Hofmüller: In completely open situations, what I find difficult is providing a context - which is even harder with performances than installations. I see two main forms in my artistic work. The first exists through my personal, physical presence. This could be a time-based event, or a series of events, that come into being through my performance. The second form comes through an already existing structure; the images and pictures, the concrete or abstract developments, are independent from my physical presence. I will talk about some of my art works as an illustration.

I designed a steel construction, welded by Christop Zeller, for the installation Wintereisblock. I put five liters of dis-

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tilled water in a small plastic bucket and placed it outside during December. Under the ice block was a metal tray to collect water drops, and a microphone to record the sounds. The idea was to produce an installation that disappears with time. I find questions of visibility, invisibility, momentariness and evanescence intriguing. Of course, seen from a physical point of view, the water does not disappear - it changes from one state to another; but for the sound-generating element, the dropping/sound stops when the ice block is gone. We do not know the exact moment and time when the ice starts melting but we know that the more water drops that fall onto the tray, the higher the tones get.

MG: It is certainly an interesting approach; you develop a musical piece by creating an inside matrix where the project can unfold freely. This is a conceptual and experimental way of working. Are there any other examples?

Reni Hofmüller: I developed a similarly open system in the project Polyphonic Ensemble: a group begins to play music together, without knowing each other's music productions or musical taste, and without coming from the same musical background. I developed the idea for this project alongside my experience with models and methods of improvised music, which allow for the possibility of structuring time and timing. We performed the Polyphonic Ensemble as part of the evening program of the symposium [prologue]2, which I organised with Marina Grini for the art space ESC in Graz, Austria. ESC is a venue for experimental art founded in 1993 by a group of people, including myself.

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The name Polyphonic Ensemble comes from a 1970s KORG synthesizer called Polyphonic Ensemble 2000. I took the circuit diagram for the graphical part of the structure. Although the KORGs structure and my structure have nothing in common, I based my graphics on the diagram for fun. It was kind of an ironic commentary as nowadays it has become unusual to perform live music without having any visuals.

The *Polyphonic Ensemble* works in an easy way. At least three people divide their sound material along the categories "Noise", "Rhythm" and "Language". The interpretation of these terms depends on the people engaging in the project. Furthermore, every person has to choose a colour from red, green or black, and the performers receive instruction sheets that include ten steps for the three colours. Coloured slides are projected on the wall stage, and performers and the audience can access these resources. The musical part starts with my conducting, by going from one slide to another. If you wish, you can easily make your own version by using the existing slides or adding further colours and terms. You will find the slides online; the *Polyphonic Ensemble* is an open code, a free software sound.

During the project, nobody knows the outcome; this is actually secondary for me. The most important thing is to make people listen to each other, to play and perform together. The central consideration for this performance is the question "How can I create a collective situation - we could also say a non-single-situation - which allows people to be together without appropriating each other?" This piece is about sharing a space, developing music together, and dissolving again to complete it.

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MG: In Polyphonic Ensemble, do you scale back and leave the room to the performers? If you step into the background as conductor and as composer then you provide a structure similar to your installation winter ice block.

Reni Hofmüller: Yes, this is my version of conceptual art. I am concerned with the question of how I can organise time, via sound, and how to set up a system that can be shared with other people: a structure that provides an open space.

The third and last piece I want to introduce is Bogen (bow), which was for a solo performance. I took my electric bass as "the known instrument", the sewing machine as an object out of daily life that I use since we came up with "Sewtheeth - the sewing machine quartet", and my world receiver, a cheap and handy apparatus. In the performance, I brought these different types of sounds together. I am constantly searching for crackling, hissing and swooshing - noises and sounds people usually try to avoid. I worked on the bass with my cello bow, a butter knife, and a mini ventilator; the sewing machine was equipped with piezo-electric microphones and the world receiver made perceivable that which could not be heard before. Again, it is the question of visibility and invisibility.

<http://renitentia.mur.at>

Writing about my work

by Reni Hofmüller

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Looking at a life backwards from "now" to "before", one can construct a lot of continuity, even logic. I do not believe in that. I perceive of people's biography as an amazing his/herstory of coincidences: open and closed doors that support or prevent things from happening. Opportunities (taken or not taken) shape what can be; life is a mixture of coincidences and decisions. I have come to understand that I am obsessed with daily life.

I decided not to play power games. I decided not to manipulate. I am convinced that this is an attitude, nothing to do with social, political or economic conditions. I know I can share this attitude with others in an infinite variety of settings: at a dinner with friends; through noncommercial community radio (Radio Helsinki); experimental internet usage (mur.at); in real physical spaces and gatherings; in political action and art. If I look at my work as an artist, I see [this attitude] in the Wintereisblock, the Polyphonic Ensemble, and in Bogen. I also see it in my collective works such as Alltag or Sewteeth.

Am I a musician? Yes, but not only that. As a musician or sound artist, I am used to having several things going on at the same time: different materials interweave into each other; they mingle, they mix. They do not exclude. One may be more present than the other, but they co-exist.

I am a media artist and an activist. I use all sorts of different methods and media. I am not a perfectionist. I am an improviser. As long as I can express my idea, technical realisation happens with what is possible in the moment; this some-

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times means that the contextualisation of the work is as important as the work itself.

I like being with people, talking, and exchanging. You (the reader, audience, fellow artist) can approach the performer and ask. There is no stupid question. My wish to you: tell people what you think about their work, do it in an open way, and with respect. You do not have to like what somebody else is doing. This is about communicating in real time. It is about now. It is about creating spaces and moments of exchange. With oneself, with others, directly or remote; it is about life. Daily Life.

Handmade Repetitions, distorted was composed for this CD-Rom. I dedicate it to the two editors, Maria José BelBel and Rosa Reitsamer; you encourage me to think, talk and write about my work.

Reni Hofmüller is an artist, musician, composer, performer, organiser and activist based in Graz, Austria. She works in the fields of (new) media, technology and politics.