

bernhard günter: interview for BLOW UP, italy

interview by *daniela cascella*.

**Let's start with your newest release, that is dedicated to Mark Rothko: could you tell me how you relate yourself and your work to this painter? And how did you work on this new cd, which "materials" did you use?**

i have been drawn to rothko's work from the first time i saw reproductions of some of his paintings... the first thing I liked was the degree of abstraction and the reduction to essential things, like the scale relationships of the fields of colour and the colours itself... also, the way the colours seemed to hover over the canvas i found quite fascinating... so i bought a big reproduction of the painting that gave the name to my piece, had it framed and put it opposite to my bed... lying there, listening to music, i looked at it and played with different versions of perceiving background and foreground (this painting has one rather bright stripe in the middle, and one can perceive it is being over the other, darker fields, or seen as if through a gap between the others)... somehow i felt it had the quality i wanted to get to in my music (at that time, i was still playing guitar in a kind of abstract jazz style...)... great music can combine to a unit with a painting, just as great music always seems to "fit" into nature for me... the first time i thought about this was when i found that actually jimi hendrix' playing fit the rhine valley perfectly, and that opening the window on a thunderstorm would enhance listening to john coltrane... i feel that looking at a landscape or a painting while listening to music can tell us a lot about both... somehow nature and the various arts seem to have something in common, maybe the complexity of structure, the selflessness, and the quality of "just being"... it is hard to find words about things that transcend language... so i started to buy all art books i could find about rothko (the number of big reproductions in the house has grown to three by now), and when i got to know morton feldman's music, his music, too, seemed to have similar qualities... when I found out later the two had been friends, it seemed very natural. so those two artists have most influenced my own work - using the computer to create sounds i obtained the degree of abstraction i was aiming for, and feldman's habit of very silent music has entered my own style... the materials for the piece "for Mark Rothko" were sampled from various cds of contemporary string quartets, and than digitally treated in my computer beyond any terms of recognition of the original material... i changed the harmonic content of the chords sampled by transposing each channel differently, and combining several sample files to new harmonies... harmony was one of my main points in this composition, and also the idea to obtain a sort "magic realism", sounds that would imply instruments that do not exist... it was a great deal of exploration and research for me to design these sounds...

**Does the use of digital technology to produce sounds, in your opinion, enhance "thinking without words"?**

i think that the use of digital technology makes it a lot easier to create entirely new sounds that defy any description or identification... and sounds that cannot (and do not have to) be described by words in the listeners mind, but only experienced directly can result in a wordless experience of music, a way of thinking music without having to resort to the concepts of language. ironically, this approach is a little similar to trying to run away from your own shadow - if you use the same type of sounds too often, people will begin to think "oh, a typical bernhard günter sound...". however, i decided to turn this 'problem' into an advantage by considering as a good reason not to get lazy and always advance in the development of my art... when you compare my first cd "un peu de neige salie" with my latest "brown, blue, brown on blue (for Mark Rothko)", they are worlds apart, but both are me, and i still think that "neige" is a valid work...

**Does this imply the fact that you are making more and more sounds reducing external sources as starting points? Or do you keep using sounds form the outside and process them, transfiguring them?**

i use sound that come from the outside, mostly from cds, and then change them so much they are not recognizable at all... everything is staying in the digital domain, from beginning to end - some cds will go in, and a new cd will come out after quite a while... just the day before yesterday, i gave a demonstration of my way of working to my guest, and i took a three second sample from a string quartet cd and made about 20 new sounds out of it, the longest one over 8 minutes long and almost a piece of its own... many people i know in the

"scene" of electroacoustic music would have released this one sound as a piece on a cd without blushing... for me, it will probably be the basis of a section in my new composition, combined with other sounds... i like complex sound mixtures, because each time you hear them they seem to have changed a little, because you are listening more consciously to another part of the frequency spectrum... i use samples of acoustic sounds mostly, because they give me a complex spectrum to start with, while purely electronic/synthetic sounds tend to be boring to our ear for the reason that the overtone spectrum does not change enough over time - and since our ears were originally an alarm system for hunters to warn them when something arrived all of a sudden, they still turn off their attention after about 3 seconds of unchanging sound - just listen to a continuous sine tone on headphones, and after some time you won't even hear it anymore... this is also how we could listen to all those cassette tapes and LPs with the big background noise they had - the background noise does not change, but the music does, so after a while you don't hear the noise anymore...

**In the notes that can be found in "un peu de neige salie" you wrote "both structural and phenomenal listening approaches seem perfectly adequate, while I generally discourage associational listening": could you give me a deeper insight into these different approaches, and also say why you don't encourage associational listening?**

i think that my music can be listened at several levels - one being the phenomena of just the sounds appearing and disappearing from and into silence, their colors and durations, on a purely sensual level, the other being the perception of the form of the piece and constructing a formal image of the whole which makes use of the mind... associational listening consists in kind of giving names to nameless sounds and disturbing their being perceived as just what they are, which is what i am aiming at in my music...

**Paradoxically, then, what do you think of people who listen to your works and then review them?**

reviews can be good and bad... the ones i like are those in which the writer tries to objectively describe the sounds on the cd, the way the music is done, etc., or in which the person reviewing the cd relates her/his personal experience of the music... what i do not like is people who compare it to other things, or read their own ideas into it: "it sounds like xxx" (which usually isn't true) or "it must be influenced by john cage" (i heard that very often, and cage's influence on me is minimal, but people believe he has invented silence - i always say that my silence is imported from japan, just like cage's...). i mean, it is a big difference to experience the music without the use of an internal description to oneself in words, and to relate this experience to other people - the best ending of a review would be: "i just listened to this and it was an interesting experience to me, so i recommend you to try it for yourself".

**Why then do you give titles to your works at all?**

at first, i named them just "untitled (number)/(year)", because i did not want them to have any representational or descriptive character, but after a while i found it was hard even for me which number was which piece, so i started giving them titles that were somehow connected to them in my mind... so on my second cd "détails agrandis" the works had titles: "four grey paintings" (because the work's structure was in four parts, and felt like a painting to me, having none of the usual types of rhythm melody or harmony, the sound colors rather being subdued...), "stone circles" (because i constantly pictured of richard long's stone circles in my mind while working on it...), and "Écriture automatique" (because in this piece, i had no idea where i was going until it was finished about 3/4 of the way - it made itself, in a way...)... in 1996 there were two untitled/numbered pieces again... then, my attitude about titles started to change - i started to use titles before the piece was made in order to fix the general direction i wanted to go. the first example is my collaboration with john duncan, "home, unspeakable" - this title taken from samuel beckett was like a sign pointing into the direction the work was to go, and i find that it actually contains the essence of these words...

the time at which the title is given to a work may vary: "slow gestures / cérémonie désir (for Heike)" was titled that after i has been finished... the words kind of surfaced in my mind from where ever and seemed appropriate... "brown, blue, brown on blue (for Mark Rothko)" was begun under a completely different working title and only got this final title when i realized how much the final piece was influenced by Rothko... sometimes during the work on piece, the working title changes during the compositional process, because the

perspective of the work changes, and i rename all files to reflect the new direction taken and keep the inspirational thread unbroken... the project i am working on at the moment has the working title "untitled composition", because it focuses on the concept of composition itself... when i started working on the project, it was still called "descendre, lentment", and some of that will certainly be contained in the overall sentiment of the work... both the aspects of sentiment/expression and form are vitally important to my work, and i think having a title for reminding me of each aspect i want to take care of will be helpful...

**Given your refusal of associational reading and at the same time the presence of titles in your works and the strong references to the visual arts, this makes me think that association can be a starting point but never an aim or a way to read your works. Is this correct?**

well, my titles refer more to poetry and literature in general than the language used to talk about today's weather, and in visual arts, i am only interested in its non representational forms, so those references are not a "key" to my works - it is like the finger pointing to the moon - the finger is not the moon... associations can of course not be totally suppressed, but many people told my they at first associated things for a while listening to my music, and then gave up, because nothing could be verified as really referring to the sound, so that then they came to listening to the sounds just as they were... and everybody who had this experience told me that she/he enjoyed it very much...

**I really like your sounds because while I listen to them I can both perceive the attention that's put into them and the attention they require. I feel translated into a "careful dimension" that I believe is extremely important especially in our era of quick (and superficial) motion. It is a great challenge having to do with these sounds: for me it feels like when I read a book and it takes a while before I go through one passage but when I've done it I have the good feeling that my brain is still working...Moreover, with your sounds it is at the same time a matter of feeling AND thinking...**

the sort of perception you describe is the ideal foe me, some sort of relaxed and contemplative attention that involves different modes of listening. the cd for rothko tries to give an atmosphere of growing structures that become brighter and brighter throughout the piece. it doesn't only give peace but also stimulates thinking. i have always thought that there is no contradiction between feeling and thinking, both form what I would call "emotional intelligence". i like it when at the same time I can feel music in my body, think about it and get a great positive calm out of it. i like sounds that question our perception.

**thinking without words is a great goal to have and to aim at - in fact, while feeling without words can be quite common, thinking is normally associated to the culture and language patterns that we all have within ourselves. Here we go back again to the mingling of thinking and feeling that can be found in your works. Is it a synthesis of these two aspects that you are drawn to, and is it in this way that the statement "thinking without words" can be read?**

in terms of the difference between thinking and feeling, it is first of all a little synthetic, because we cannot think without feeling, and the other way round only very rarely - then, when we handle, balance, and contemplate complex structures of feelings in our mind by recalling or anticipating them, we do not necessarily use words, but i would call it thinking because we are structuring facts of direct experience in our mind , although this can be done without naming the feelings in question. and the words we use to describe what we feel have very often been experienced as inadequate by probably anybody who has tried to voice her/his innermost feelings... and this is where art comes in - it would seem to me that poetry is aiming at transcending the limits of words by combining them in non utilitarian ways. music, painting, and dance (especially in their abstract, non descriptive forms...) can go very far in transcending the utilitarian character of language. if we now drag the word "form" out of the parenthesis, it is the key to freeing art from language when we develop adequate forms for the different arts and their materials (sounds, colors, body movements) that do not use language as their model...

### **When did you start being interested in sounds and in the idea of making sounds?**

at the age of about five or six, i started stretching rubber rings over my grandpa's cigar boxes and plucking them, listening to the sounds - this was making sounds without the idea of it, and i'm still trying to get back to that!

at some point, very early in my life, i decided to become a musician, so this is an idea of it, and then, when you try to become a musician, you have to learn something about the techniques used to make music, another idea of music... and when you have learned it all, you drop it and just go for it, and you are back at the beginning of just wanting music. in zen, they say that each time you should sit down to meditate like a beginner - it is called "the beginner's mind", and it is a valuable thing to ponder for composers.

### **Do you ever think about the listener/s when you are composing your works?**

the answer is: no. i try to do what the sounds ask me to do, by following their tendencies, by using their possibilities in the ways they seem to suggest... i think that if i do this with the right attitude, the works will come out right (and listeners who will like them will be found). I cannot think of ways that people will react to what i do while i am composing, because there are as many possible reactions as there are people, and it would paralyze my work if i thought about this... i am not trying to please anybody, either, not even myself...

**This is interesting: while you don't think about the listener, your works are so open and leave so much space to the listeners themselves - each time I listen to your cd's I seem to catch a different hue - It varies, I've noticed, on the conditions around myself and within myself also! This is exactly the opposite of what happens to music that has a "target" and that puts people's minds in a cage by the use of certain fixed signifiers that "have" to convey certain feelings.**

i am proud of my works to be absolutely "non violent" - i never try to force anything on anybody, but i try to make a gift that i can offer to my listeners to enjoy and make their life more interesting... and i use the same attitude towards the sound materials i use - i respect them as they are and try to realize their potential in a form intelligible intuitively for humans... and sounds being in a "comfortable" form and being themselves will sound open for the listener - there are as many pieces by me as there are listeners.