

bernhard günter: essays

buddha with the sun face / buddha with the moon face

i experienced a performance of jeph jerman for the first time in 1996, when after performing at the Table of the Elements Yttrium Festival in chicago, i went to seattle to perform at eric lanzillotta's Anomalous Music Performance Space.

jeph jerman was also scheduled on one night. after dimming all lights and purifying the place by burning sagebrush, he set up a small box with a candle burning on it and took out many smaller and larger objects, most of them found in the desert: pieces of wood, stones, pieces of cactus, feathers, dry leaves, dry seed capsules, any many more things....

he did not use any type of amplification, like a microphone or such, but rather started to produce a fascinating all acoustic soundscape, manipulating these objects, with the audience sitting on the floor close around him.

his exquisite sense of timing and sound texture made his performance absolutely captivating and haunting...

in a way, i had the feeling that he was pursuing an aim, a quality in his work, similar to what i look for in my own work: to make the audience experience the sound as itself, in all of its qualities and relationships between the different events.

the fact that my own work is entirely based on electronic means did not seem to matter much to me in terms of essence. to resume my impression of jeph's performance i can say: i was blown away...

so when jeph and i went for a cup of coffee after the show, i asked him whether he would like to do a release on my label, trente oiseaux, and was very delighted he agreed to my proposition. back in germany, i waited for quite a while to receive a recording from him, then, it finally arrived. unfortunately, there were problems with the recording in terms of it being disturbed by outside noises, like cars, and a rather high noise level; jeph had put a note in for me saying that he would not be surprised if i thought the recording was not good enough for a release. i was very unhappy about this problem, trying very hard to find a solution, so that our project would not be ruined by it.

finally, i came up with the idea to create a composition myself, based on jeph's performance on the tape. i reasoned that if the technical world came to disturb the qualities of his work, i could maybe create a sound world based on electronic techniques around it that would camouflage and swallow the disturbances to make them part of the whole. this concept resulted, after much time and effort, in the piece you hear on this cd on my friend koji marutani's label Digital Narcis.

the piece is called "buddha with the sun face / buddha with the moon face" to allude to the fact that jeph is a man who has been in the desert sun much, and that i have spent much time in snow and cold with the winter moon visible.

i wish to dedicate this work to jeph jerman, who has supplied the basis for it, and to my longtime companion heike, who has assisted me in many ways during its creation.

let me finish these notes by saying that if you ever have a chance to see jeph jerman perform live, do not miss it!

bernhard günter, january 1999

the ant moves / the black and yellow carcass / a little closer

speaking about "the ant..." inevitably implies speaking about my general ideas on composition and working with sound, since all of my works are based on a common concept. to enter a discussion of this concept, i will use the two following lines: the motto (and e-mail signature) of my label "THINKING WITHOUT WORDS IS THE ULTIMATE GOAL", and my private e-mail signature haiku "elle fonderait / dans ma main / un peu de neige salie".

the first line expresses my wish to create a "language free zone" with my music by using only non referential sound materials and my refusal of any illustrative elements. i started to "think without words" when i was about 18, creating and handling/balancing multi-faceted blocks of impressions, emotions, feelings, states of being and so forth, contemplating them without naming them... this type of non-verbal, non referential reflection is what characterizes my relationship with sound, painting, poetry, and art in general. i believe that since my work is the act of a human, it can (potentially) be transmitted to any other human, without recourse to language.

the second line refers to both my first cd "un peu de neige salie" and to a haiku by basho (an english translation would be: "it would melt / in my hand / a little soiled snow", but i only use the french version, because the english one lacks one quality: in french, "snow" is female...). it is alluding to my preference for the small, non spectacular, and austere, as well as to the fact that my view of the world is a very zen influenced one.

these notions have led me to a compositional strategy that is based on the sound itself. i start from sound material that i listen to very often and in a very attentive manner to find its internal qualities, tendencies, and potentials... these are enhanced by digital treatments to underline the direction the sound seems to want to go; selected materials are then juxtaposed in various combinations that constitute the basis for the compositional form. this form always remains flexible until the very last moment and grows like a crystal. what has been the beginning, may well end up being the end, and vice versa. in this process, silence is as important to me as sound, since i consider silence the "other" of sound, like in the relation of light and shadow... both unite to form the final "one".

the digital hard disk recording system i use is ideal for this working strategy, because i can save different versions, move parts and elements around again and again, and insert subtle changes into non identical repetitions...

all impressions of spatial quality are directly taken from the sound material; i never use common effects like reverb, delay, or whatever... whether a sound will be wide or narrow, over your head or under your feet is determined by equalization and stereo placement.

in the case of "the ant...", the above mentioned strategy has led to one of the most dense and busy compositions i have ever created – the soundscapes develop in slowly flowing movements, changing their qualities over time... the types of material range from natural sound based surrealist constructs to really "electronic" sounding elements that have their own environment, so to speak.... some of the sounds are pretty "insectoid"; i guess i must have fallen for the seduction of the title (which is actually a haiku by john hudak, who also provided a lot of the basic sound materials....) ...

however, i do not want to go on describing the sounds in the piece and thus sabotage my own non referential concept – i want to have each listener experience her/his very own version, and not prescribe a certain perception...

to define the form of my works, i have invented two basic categories, called "tableau" and "parcours"; in the case of "the ant...", we might speak of a "parcours de tableaux" – it is really like visiting an exhibition of paintings, all by the same artist, each different, but all having something in common ...

we are walking along the paintings slowly, looking at each one for a while (morton feldman once said that he "painted time canvases with sound paint"; i would subscribe to that notion anytime... speaking of him, he has also said: "sounds are like people: if you push them, they will push you back" – that is something i always keep in mind.)....

as usual, i have measured the timing for the work not in bpm (beats per minute), but by the slow breathing of the (first) contemplative listener (myself), a habit that has often brought listeners to me at concerts, asking how something so "artificial" could be so organic..

well, this has been a discourse quite long enough on a kind of work that tries to keep away from language as an obstacle to free floating perception, and so i shall end here.

bernhard günter, koblenz, february 1999

- A NEW TIME - - A NEW TIME - - - A NEW TIME

anybody who has ever become really involved in listening to a piece of music, or looking at a painting, or reading a book, will have noticed that our subjective time is not feeling the same as the chronometrical time our watch shows...

time can run much slower or much faster, along with the musical flow of events, a painting may stop our feeling for the passing of time altogether, and looking up from a book, we notice that much more time has passed than we thought.

in my work as a composer, i have often found that listeners took a shorter piece to last longer than an actually longer one, and that their estimates of the duration of a work were often quite far from the actual chronometrical one.

these observations, together with the interest i have taken in neurological research into our perception of time, have led me to devise a new time unit for measuring the duration of my musical works. said research has found that our perception of "present", "now", "the present moment" is a time window of about three seconds, everything else is memory or anticipation.

so my new time unit is three seconds long, and i call it dim, which stands for the french expression "durée; ici, maintenant" ("duration; here, now"). from now on, i will give the duration of my works expressed in numbers of this unit:

un lieu à un point eefacé, 1ere partie 300, 0 dim
un lieu à un point eefacé, 2eme partie 305,6 (period) dim
the ant moves / the black and yellow carcass / a little closer 564, 666 dim
vertige hasard 240, 3 (period) dim
slow gestures / cérémonie désir 464, 3 dim
buddha with the sun face / buddha with the moon face 434, 0 dim
brown, blue, brown on blue (for Mark Rothko) 770, 0 dim

like this, you know how many "moments" of your attention/consciousness each of my works is asking for...
before you can ask: a 24 hours' day is 28.800 dim :-) ...
the strong tendency of dim values to end with a period shows how imponderable time really is...

bernhard günter, april 1999

slow gestures / cérémonie désir (for heike)

this work has been developed out of an earlier piece called 'deceptive likeness', released as a part of a collaboration 3 x 3" cd on V2 Archief, netherlands, i did together with ralf wehowsky, a.k.a. RLW. due to the pressure of deadlines the piece did not turn out to be really satisfying for - i was not happy with the all over rhythmic design and flow... so finally, when the original release was sold out, i decided to rework the piece. starting this project in early 1999, the work took an entirely different direction from the original version, becoming longer and also slower, new parts and sounds found their way into it... its character and intentions changed so much i decided it needed a new title.

it is very difficult for me to speak about this work, since it getting very close to my goal of creating a language free space, so i prefer to let it go without any further comment than that i dedicate it to my companion heike - each gesture is speaking of her, and speaking to her, without words.

bernhard günter, koblenz, germany, april 1999

brown, blue, brown on blue (for Mark Rothko)

I finished "brown, blue, brown on blue (for Mark Rothko)" in mid-july 1999, and it picks up where "slow gestures / cérémonie désir (for Heike)" left off (actually, the two pieces can be listened to as one large work in two parts...).

It is dedicated to my favorite painter, Mark Rothko, and the title is taken from one of his paintings that has accompanied me for a long time as print hanging beside my bed. I finally got a chance to see this painting in an exhibition of Rothko's works at the Musée de l'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1999 and was more deeply touched by it than i can express in words.

These strong feelings have found their way into the work i started composing immediately after my visit at the museum - it is not intended to describe the painting itself, but rather the emotions it inspired. The itinerary the work takes is, in some respect, a reversed mirror image of the development of Rothko's painting during his life: where Rothko started his characteristic style with bright colors and ended in dark grays and blacks, i am starting with dark colors implying his tragic death to end in a kind of celebration of his greatness being recognized by so many people now, and the heritage of wonderful works he has left us.

The silence is from Japan, the rhythmic flow from India, the harmonic understanding from 20th Century Europe, the formal devices are the consequences i have drawn from Morton Feldman, and the inspiration from Mark Rothko. This is the good side of globalization - new combinations of cultures are made possible... The piece also represents a new level of craftsmanship for me, in terms of handling a large compositional structure (at 770.0 dim - 38:30 min.- the longest piece i have composed so far), and of my "savoir-faire" concerning the ways of using of my (further reduced) technical equipment...

bernhard günter, October 1999

time, dreaming itself

This work's main aspects are, as its title suggests, time, and the notion of slowness. Of complex harmonic design similar to "brown, blue, brown on blue (for Mark Rothko)", the composition uses both instrumental images, and elements of a more soundscape-like character, plus a non-tempered scale as the basis for the various transpositions of the sounds. Other than that, i think it will speak for itself...

bernhard günter, May 2000

then, silence

"Then, Silence is dedicated to Morton Feldman and Luigi Nono. The experience of listening to their music has changed my understanding, my way of hearing, my thinking about, and my creating music so much that my own work would simply be unthinkable without it. Dedicating Then, Silence to them is my modest Thank You to Morton Feldman and Luigi Nono, expressing not only my admiration, but also the sadness their untimely parting causes me."

bernhard günter, August 2000

Crossing the River

I have finalized and mastered Crossing the River a couple of days ago. It is both a place, or environment, and a musical statement. It is best listened to in the dark, so you may become fully immersed in the sound (i find just before dawn the perfect time). It is calm, peaceful, and beautiful, guaranteed to slow you down after a busy urban day (but unlike chemical products designed to this effect, it leaves your mind clear and aware). The effect it had on me was that i bagged my elaborate liner notes about 'crossing the river' as a Buddhist metaphor for reaching enlightenment, and replaced them by this:

'Ceci est la couleur de mes rêves'
[title of a painting by] Juan Miró

('This is the color of my dreams')

For release, Crossing the River is paired with Haiku for Mu, composed for the 'lower case sound' compilation last year, now re-mastered and embedded in silence. Being of a nightly mood, too, it combines perfectly with Crossing the River.

bernhard günter, January 2001

Monochrome White, Polychrome w/Neon Nails, Monochrome Rust

The original idea for Monochrome White came to me during a visit of a large Bill Viola retrospective in Frankfurt. One of the installations consisted of a video image projected onto (and through) several semi-transparent tissues hung from the ceiling. I found the weightless aspect of this work extremely attractive, and so on my way home started thinking about ways to translate this impression into music.

The result of my reflections was the original concept for Monochrome White (still called White Painting at the time): the piece would only use high frequency spectra to lift it off the ground, so to speak, and it would only use "empty" intervals (4ths and 9ths) to not have it rest on a root note, but to have it harmonically floating/suspended.

When in 1999 I received Darren & Vicky's "In Audio 1" cd, I really liked the sonority of the small noises and glitches on it, immediately felt this was the right source material to realize my concept for Monochrome White with, and as the press release coming with it stated that it was an openwork in progress, I felt entitled to use it.

I started by treating, filtering, and transposing the sounds I had read into my Macintosh, and developing a formal scheme to organize the piece, then started assembling the different layers in ProTools. When I had finished the first two layers (of four planned), a visit by a fellow artist interrupted my work, and kind of broke my red thread of imagination, so that I stopped working on it.

In May 2000, Darren & Vicky organized a concert for me in London, and in one of our conversations I asked Darren whether any artists had used the In Audio cd for works of their own. Darren said nobody had, and I told him that I had, but that my original plan had never been fully realized. I promised to send him a mixdown of what I had finished so far. In October 2000, I finally took the time to restore my ProTools session, and made a stereo master of it. When listening to the piece, I realized that it was actually quite complex enough, and did not really need the two additional layers originally planned. I then decided to propose it to my friends Richard Chartier and Taylor Dupree's label LINE (because it was listening to Richard's cd SERIES that actually led me to restore my piece), only to find that by some amazing coincidence they were already set to release the "In Audio 2/1" cd, Darren & Vicky's own variation of the original In Audio cd.

So it seems that a definite Karma is bringing Darren & Vicky, Richard, and myself together in the context of an interrelated project, and I'm very happy about it. However, our project did not stop at this point, as I devised a concept that turned Monochrome White into a triptychon.

The original piece was mutated into Polychrome w/Neon Nails, the second piece included in this release. Polychrome w/Neon Nails is actually of lower pitch (although this does not appear so to the ear), and the rate of change has doubled compared to Monochrome White, while its symmetrical structure has been retained. It is a very present, active work, sounding like a big number of digital insects going about their business (or at least this is one possible metaphor for it).

The third piece in the triptychon, Monochrome Rust, presents what a shiny new, digitally clean piece like Polychrome w/Neon Nails might become after fifty years of degradation, and corrosion - the Neon Nails have become rusted, and lost their shine. Nevertheless, this study of transience is not negative; it rather contains some of the calm of handling memories of long gone events, seen in a new perspective created by the passing of time... Monochrome Rust will be released on LINE next year.

The concept of the triptychon includes the possibility of playing all three parts (or any two of them) simultaneously, making it a perfect work to be presented in the form of a sound installation.

bernhard günter, January 2001

Redshift

I was forming plans for a very different project in my mind when i came across a number of DAT tapes from my first sampling days in 1993, the time of 'Un peu de neige salie' - these tapes contained sounds i had not used in those days, and that i could not at all remember the origins / sources of, but that sounded interesting to my present day ears. I thus started to work with them, without the slightest idea of what might be the result, and the piece kind of made itself - the result was a structure consisting of noise sounds to which i added a complementary microtonal structure of instrumental samples to form the whole. It is difficult to describe the result, but i think it quite unique in the impression it gives - when listened to at low or medium volume (it is supposed to be), the sounds seem to come from a far distance, and create shifting impressions of space.

The associations of signals coming from far away, and transforming space it gave me led to the title Redshift, a term that describes a phenomenon discovered in the 1920's: the light of far distant galaxies is shifted to the red spectrum, and the farther away they are, the stronger the redshift is. This discovery can only be explained by a Doppler Effect implying that these galaxies are moving away from us, and that the universe is expanding. These associations are, of course, purely subjective - you do not have to imagine swarms of neutrinos, or radio signals from a quasar to enjoy the piece.

bernhard günter, March 2001