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Interviewed by Vlad Kudryavtsev

Q: "More and more I wonder what the point of organizing sound into music is. Just walking down the street sound so great. Everywhere you go, it's already there".

A: This statement keeps coming back to me, both from interviewers and, of course, in my own thoughts. And it's still really a dilemma for me. I heard John Cage in a recording of talks with Morton Feldman say that he started working with radios in his compositions so that when he went to the beach and all the kids were sitting around listening to portable radios he could say, "All I hear is my own music."

And perhaps this is the same for me, as whatever sounds I am hearing are my own music, or at least, as soon as I recognize them as such they become music.

I guess I continue to make music beyond the realms of just hearing sounds in the environment (i.e., composing, performing, etc) because I enjoy to do it and still feel inspired to express the sounds I am only hearing in my head. When one day this inspiration fades I will just have to content myself with the experience of walking down the street, hearing music where ever I go.

Q: In your sound art there's a feeling that your sound is "frozen" or "put into concrete" like sculpture. Sound is stagnate and one should move around your compositions like looking at a sculpture to get a complete representation of what you wanted to say.

A: What I am interested in is active listening to sound--an observance. It seems to me that our senses are stunned from so much input that we just dismiss much sensory input (in this case, sound) because we don't take the time to hear or see what is actually going on.

With my work the casual listener will probably come away empty handed as at first glance it might seem nothing is happening at all. Only with time and patience will it become clear that in fact many things are happening, that the sound is changing--often before one even notices this--and that what might, as you put it here, appear to be "frozen" is in fact flowing. You might liken this to ice: on the surface it seems frozen but if you put a microphone down into it you will hear many different sounds.

In terms of moving around the sound, as if it were a work of sculpture--I think more to the point would be moving around one's perception of the sound. I read in a text by Alvin Lucier that the real material of his work is not sound but the perception of sound, examining how one experiences sound. This was certainly an inspiration for my own work, as I think what I am going for is a re-examination of our perception through sound: how are we hearing this, how are we feeling this, how are we experiencing a situation through sound. The sound in itself may seem the focus but what I am really striving for is examining our perception--moving around it, if you will, as if it were a tangible, physical entity there in our consciousness.

Q: What about using narration in composition, telling a story?

A: Well, I certainly enjoy hearing this in other music (pop music, for example) but for my own work this is not something I am interested in.

Q: Your music doesn't use even any metaphors. For example, Günter Müller uses a lot of loops with a machinery metaphor (they sound like machines working).

A: No, I don't really think in these terms. For me, sound is not a reference to anything else. The sound is there to be experienced for what it is--if the listener can read something more into this, then that is for them to discover. But this is not my intention.

Q: You use drums, cymbals in your music in different a-rhythmic way, even percussive events happen less and less.

A: From the very beginning, what interested me about percussion was its sound. Of course, rhythm was also very important but perhaps more as a means of finding my way deeper into the sound.

For example, for many years I studied and performed on different hand drums (Iranian, Arabic, Turkish). I often spent many hours playing rhythms and what I noticed was that after a certain period of time the rhythm disappeared and all I was conscious of was the sound of the drum. And this often only occurred when practicing rhythms.

So, the way I am using percussion in my work now -- primarily for its sound, its texture, its physical presence (and not rhythmically) -- is not that far removed from what got me into working with percussion in the first place.

Q: You always emphasize physicality of your sound. It's very close to Phill Niblock's ideas. Position of your body in a room during his concerts changes perception of music.

A: I am also interested in sound for its psychological effects--how certain frequencies create different psychological or spiritual conditions in us.

Q: Once you said that you try to create a sound environment in your compositions. Your idea broadens the meaning of environmental sounds, adds to it something or how do you see it yourself?

A: What I am referring to is creating a space with sound--someplace the listener can enter into. Like going in a room, though in this case the room is not a place filled with sound but a place created from sound. This could be in a physical sense or in a psychological sense. That is, transferring the listener to another place through sound.

Q: "The sense that sound is eternal" is very close to Indian music and Indian

philosophy. Rig Veda starts with the idea that in the beginning was the Sound.

A: I haven't read the Rig Veda but I am very interested in Indian music and I have also visited India.

It would seem logical, however, that sound is eternal as sound is energy and energy, even life energy, does not dissipate. There is only one source.

Q: What makes an improvisation good? What makes a live performance good?

A: In terms of a "good" live improvisation for me, this happens when there is good communication between the players but also when there is some sense of danger, when it is not clear where one is going (!). It is usually in this context that I have my best ideas, the strongest inspiration.

In terms of a "good" live performance, I would, for sake of brevity here, limit this to my solo performances and say that I feel good after a concert when I felt one with the sound, when I somehow lost sight of cognitive movement and let myself be guided by the sound. As I would like to create an environment for others through sound so too would I like this for myself when I perform. When I can enter this place I feel like I've had a good performance.

Q: What do you think about disputes whether experimental music (or simply new music) should be innovative?

A: I feel it is imperative for the artist to find their own voice, to concentrate on what they want to say and not to worry about how innovative their work is. By focusing too much on innovation one loses track of the personal vision, of the voice. If innovation happens to be a part of this voice, I see no problem. But if innovation becomes the modus operandi for an artist's work then in most cases I sense an emptiness. Innovation is a means to an end but, for me at least, not the end in itself.

Q: Do you think that art should satisfy social order, that art should reflect current sociopolitical points? And should art satisfy the needs of an audience or teach an audience something new?

A: I don't feel art should be political. On the other hand, I feel quite influenced by the political and social environment in which I live. Indirectly then, my work is also a product of my position in society, what I see on street everyday, read in the news, etc.

I don't believe in teaching an audience anything--at least not in the didactic sense. By example, I would hope my work provides an entry point into a broader sense of consciousness, spurring people on to a deeper approach to listening.

In a sense, this could be the most political aspect of my work, and something I never set out on as some kind of conscious crusade: to create a work where people need to take time to enter the experience. This goes directly against the grain of life today, which seems to be getting faster and faster, where we feel that we have less and

less time for experiencing something.

Q: What do you think about sound ecology? This field is connected with visual ecology (visual pollution: ugly architecture, ads, billboards etc).

A: Well, of course this is just a matter of one's point of view. One person's noise is another person's music.

I generally feel that there is certainly a saturation of media intake in our everyday environments, but I'm not sure if this has become worse during the time I've lived on this planet.

The only time I was really irritated recently was when I was up in the Alps trying to record some quite landscapes and jet planes keep flying overhead--and here I am as much to blame as I spend no small amount of time flying in these same jet planes!

Q: What made you stop Cut?

A: I just didn't have the time any longer to run the label as I would like to.

When I started Cut in 1997 I was living alone. Today I have three kids. Over the last few years I realized that I would have to make a choice between having enough time for my family and my own work and continuing with the label. Of course, I could have reduced the scope of the label (one release a year, for example) but this wasn't the way I would like to have a record label.

So, in the end I thought it would be better for everyone if I just stopped the label rather than continuing on with it in some half-hearted fashion.

Q: Tell us the history of Cut. What did you pursue creating the label and publishing artists? Any concepts behind the label? What difficulties did you have and how did you cope with them?

A: I started Cut in 1997 in Berlin, initially to publish my own work. Over the years I also became interested in publishing the work of other artists. This generally happened because I knew someone and really liked their work and felt something almost like a moral obligation for the world to hear it!

I never had any concept behind the label, other than to publish work I liked. This could be electronic work, acoustic, it didn't matter. The only pre-requisite was that the work moved me.

The greatest difficulty I had with the label was always just finding enough time to keep it going. Of course, I had the standard problems like most other people with distributors going out of business or not wanting to pay, but for the most part I didn't have such a hard time of it.

Q: What are your memories of life in Berlin and of its musical scene? How did it influence you? Stefan Betke mastered Repeat's "Temporary Contemporary" and I

wonder whether some dub feel came from Berlin dub techno scene or whether you and Toshi came to this sound independently.

A: I moved to Berlin in February 1990. This was a very exciting time. The city was in a dynamic, even chaotic state and it was exhilarating to have experienced this point in history.

My musical life there was rather schizophrenic, to say the least. On the one hand, I loved techno music, going out to clubs, etc. And on the other hand I was playing primarily acoustic free improvised music as a drummer in many different groups. I was also studying Turkish, Arabic and Iranian percussion. At one point I had a grant from the Arts Council of Berlin to study Tombak (Iranian hand drum) with a teacher (Madjid Khaladj) in Paris. I also played from 1994-1998 in the American composer Arnold Dreyblatt's group "The Orchestra of Excited Strings."

It was also in Berlin that I started to work with electronics, something I definitely got into through my friends who were techno producers.

Regarding Repeat's "Temporary Contemporary" and Stefan Betke, this had nothing to do with the dub techno scene in Berlin at that time (which, of course, I was aware of but which I didn't feel drawn to or influenced by) but more with the fact that Stefan was a friend of a friend of mine (Mo Loschelder from Elektro Music Department) and when I asked her about someone to master the recording she put me in touch with Stefan.

Q: Speaking of Cut you were nominated this year in Quartz Awards. Did you applied yourself or was it somebody else's idea to include you in shortlist?

A: I'm not sure how I landed on the short list. For many years I had been receiving their announcements about the competition but for some reason I had never entered a submission.

This year I sent a submission and for whatever reason I ended up on the short list. Which is ironic as now the label has stopped!

Q: You run several different series of sound installations. Some of them are purely aural, some of them have a visual component. I'm interested in the history of your sound installations and their development. How did you come to the idea of making sound installations? What did you pursue with them? Will you broaden the use of visual component? What role does it play?

A: In 2000 I was asked to show a sound installation in St. Pölten, Austria. The curator already knew my music and asked me if I would also be interested in doing a sound installation. The exhibition took place in 2001 and the piece "Dropped From The Sky" became my first sound installation.

Looking back now, I did many things in this work which prefaced future installations; and many things which I never did again, primarily the interactive aspect (the use of movement sensors to trigger sound events, for example).

Over time I would say my preferred focus has been to create site-specific works for public spaces. I say "preferred focus" here as it is not always possible to find this kind of situation to work in.

I am interested in experiencing and defining a space through sound. The sound I place in a space is not the main focus of my work, rather, the space itself. For this reason, my works are not visually oriented. I am not interested in creating sound objects (though in some works of mine there has been this element in a peripheral context). And I believe that the sound placed in a space does not only effect our perception of the space's aural qualities but of its visual and spatial qualities as well.

Q: The idea of active listening is a recurrent motive in your interviews.

A: I think active listening is more the product of expanded consciousness--the more we are aware of our environment the more actively we can enter into it.

Q: Tell us about your first musical memories.

A: This would have to be seeing The Beatles perform on Ed Sullivan television show when I was a small boy. Later, I heard most of my music on the radio. When I was four-years old my father gave me one of the first very small Japanese portable AM radios--the kind with only one ear piece. I remember sitting in my room and just searching the airwaves for different music and voices. It seemed very mysterious to me!

I grew up in Los Angeles and spent a good deal of time travelling around with my parents in the car. Here too, the radio was always on and I remember as a kid loving the pop music of this time (1960's).

Q: There's one aspect I'm curious about. When Keith Rowe came to play in Moscow, I talked to him a lot and when I asked about you he said that besides all good relationships the Swiss school is much criticized for a lot of editing and processing of live recordings, recordings of live improvisations. Nobody has any idea how the original recordings sounded, so people don't know how the concerts sounded. To what extent do the concerts recordings undergo the editing/processing/mixing process?

A: I can only answer this question for my own work (and I'm not really aware of any "Swiss School," as for sure all the people I work or have worked with in Switzerland--Günter Müller, Norbert Möslang, Tomas Korber--have very different approaches).

In general I try to avoid any re-mixing of live recordings. By re-mixing I mean, for example, cutting out one section of a recording and putting it together with another. I am generally only cutting out something like technical errors in the recording (someone losing it for a second and causing a massive explosion of feedback, someone dropping a bottle in the room, hardware errors, etc) which would make the rest of what would be an otherwise good recording unuseable.

I often record to multi-track (each player to their own separate track) as well as a

stereo room track. This give me the most control in making each player's presence as clear as possible, while still retaining some of the acoustics of the performance space. The very nature of a multi-track recording necessitates mixing (and, again, I'm not re-ferring to "re-mixing" here).

The reason I don't want to re-mix a recording of an improvisation is because I feel an improvisation is a dialog--breaking up the recording or re-arranging its parts disrupts the sense of this dialog.

I'm not dogmatic, however, and some recordings, for example "Breathings" with argentine pianist Gabriel Paiuk, is a series of shorter pieces culled from longer improvisations in the studio. Here we decided to just chose what we felt were the best parts of each improvisation, though we didn't mix different parts together to create these smaller parts.

The argument that "people don't know how the concerts sounded" after one has mixed a recording is not logical to me as a recording of a concert never sounds as it sounded in the room while it was being performed. These recordings are, in my opinion, at best very good postcards--a "Wish you were here" sent from an event which, depending on your point of view, you will either regret or be glad you missed.

If you want to take this argument to its logical conclusion, then one should just dismiss all recordings of concerts (especially concerts of improvised music) as the recording would only distort the music, giving a false impression of what had actually happened.

Fortunately, I don't place much credence in this argument.

Q: There's another aspect to it. Toshi Nakamura once said that improvisation as almost uncontrollable activity leads to a lot of shit happening and one has to edit it and even mix it to make it a work of art. What do you think about it?

A: Look, there are so many ways of approaching this. For one person this "lot of shit happening" is not part of "great art" and for others it is exactly this shit which is the great art!

I feel there is room for all approaches and, beyond this, I see no place for dogma when were are talking about music which is supposed to be "free." Free doesn't mean to me: "don't do this, you can't do that." Who is anyone to tell the artist how they should work? And since when is improvised music some kind of holy grail, to be held above all other music--something you shouldn't touch because it is so precious, something religious?

When I lived in Los Aneles in the 1980's there used to be this band there called Paper Bag. The name of this group refers to the saying, "So-and-so can't play their way out of a paper bag..." And this group used to print a kind of disclaimer on all their records: "100% improvised." Like, who cares? If the music is good and it's not improvised, so what? Is the music less good because it's improvised? Or, conversely, if the music is crap but we know it's improvised, do we say, "Nice try guys, here's a few points for at least being improvisers." No.

So, what I'm trying to say here: it is not important to me whether or not the music has been improvised or not. I'm basically interested in a recording which moves and inspires me, regardless of how the artist obtained these results.

Q: You speak about space as a kind of not only another instrument in your setup but as a co-player, co-composer in your work.

A: Yes, because to a large extent the space I am working in determines what I will be able to do. I am interested in finding my way into a space and, hopefully, through this sensitizing the audience to the space as well. I can follow this approach best when performing solo or working in the context of a sound installation. When collaborating with other musicians I often have to put more concentration into my dialog with my playing partners than with the nature of the space itself.

Q: You mentioned the work of Max Neuhaus as an inspirator of your sound installations.

A: Not just my work in sound installations but also Neuhaus' early work with live electronics. Very early in the 1960's he was doing things which still sound fresh even today ("Fontana Mix - Feed" for example).

Q: When did you start making music? What did you like about drums that you decided to learn them and make instrument of choice?

A: I started playing music when I was twenty-one, in 1981. I was first attracted to the drums because of their sound. And when I actually had the chance to sit down and start to play I realized immediately that I had a very natural relationship with this instrument--I just started to play immediately, soon working with different rock groups and playing concerts.

It was also a very inspiring time to live in, with many groups, many places to hear music. Music seemed to be so much in the air that just this atmosphere alone helped me along.

Q: Who were and are your musical and esthetical influences?

A: The list would be so long...I mean, I suppose you are referring to influences for the drums? Or what...?

Q: What were reasons that made you a nomad for a long time?

A: I never saw myself as a nomad, actually. I mean, I grew up in Los Angeles and in my final year in college I studied in London one year. Nine years later I moved to Berlin, where I also lived for nearly nine years, moving thereafter to Geneva (one year) and finally to Zürich, where I have also been for nine years now. I wouldn't call this nomadic, just "moving around a bit."

Q: When did you first become aware of improv scene? What pulled you towards improvisation?

A: I first became aware of improvisation through American jazz music, which led me to other forms of improvisation (European free improvised music, for example).

Q: I know that you didn't like the atmosphere of old free improvisation, like FMP.

A: That's not true: I did in fact enjoy much of the music but the whole scene around FMP, this Old Boys Club...no, this I didn't like at all. Some of my favorite musicians have done records for FMP, but I think this has little to do with the whole scene around FMP, especially at the time when I moved to Berlin in 1990. Things seemed to be getting a bit stale by then for me.

Q: What have you been doing in the 90s? Tell us about your memories from that period.

A: In the 1990's I was playing a lot of percussion (Iranian, Arabic, Turkish), playing drumset in rock and improvised settings and, towards the middle of the 1990's, turning more to electronics.

Q: What and who influenced you as an improviser?

A: Again, the list would be too long. There would just be no point in even trying to start naming people as there is way too much music and musicians out there which have been great inspirations for me.

Q: You switched over to analogue synthesizer (Doepfer, I believe).

A: I started to work with the Doepfer analog synthesizer in 2001.

Q: What instruments do you use? Tell us about evolution of your instrumentation.

A: Right now I work primarily with analog synthesizer and percussion (in a live context usually one drum and two cymbals).

I started on drumset. Around 1990 I began playing Arabic percussion (daf) and continued on with Iranian (tombak) and Turkish (darabuka) percussion. Working a lot with these hand drums brought me deeper into the sound of the drum itself.

Around 1994 I bought my first sampler and began trying to integrate this into my playing on drumset. In 1998 I bought my first laptop computer, which replaced the sampler. I worked with various live sampling and processing applications (Lisa, Max/MSP). I often found, however, that working with the computer lacked a certain presence for me. When I switched to synthesizer I felt a more tangible connection to the electronics and also found a better way to integrate this with percussion.

Q: How did you get hooked up with Asher?

A: Asher wrote to me in 2005 to contribute a re-mix for a project of his.

Q: Unfortunately i haven't listened to Vista. How do 2 recordings differ from each other (i mean the one that will be out on mikroton)?

A: Well, "Vista" is a composition first of all and the new one, which will be coming out on mikroton, is an improvisation recorded in concert. This recording of the improvisation was not edited or re-mixed (just thought I would get that in there for all the hardcore improv fans out there who want to make sure they will be getting what they pay for!).

Q: Tell us how this recording came about and it's about.

A: Well, the live one came about because I was planning a tour of the U.S. with Jon Mueller on the occasion of our CD "Topography," which came out last year. As I was going to be in Asher's area, we decided it would be a great opportunity to perform together. We had, in fact, not even met before this.

Q: What is in your schedule now?

A: Right now I'm on tour in the USA. I'm having concerts with Joe Colley, Gust Burns and also solo. When I get home I will be playing with Z'ev and Pierre Berthet.

Other than live work I will be working on new compositions and preparing new recordings for release.

Q: What are you future plans?

A: I can't see very far ahead ever, but basically I just want to be able to keep working, doing what I'm doing now and hopefully getting better at it.