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Interview with Jason Kahn about Cut

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Cut label's 10th anniversary will be celebrated next year. Everyone involved in this field must agree that it deserves respect for continuing a 500-copies-per-title label all this while. You said in an interview before that Cut was launched to release the recording of your group named Cut. Can you describe how the label philosophies were built up and what they are? What difficulties has the Cut label ever faced and how did you overcome them?

Basically, Cut's operating philosophy is an extension of what I experienced growing up in the world of punk during the late 1970's and, to a certain extent, the Berlin techno scene of the early 1990's. Both these musical movements depended on the self-determination of artists to publish their own work and the work of like-minded colleagues. The idea of getting one's hands dirty and being directly involved in the whole process, from composing, recording, designing the artwork of the cd/record covers/website, to directly contacting stores, distributors and concert organizers has always been a central factor in my work. When having a label of this size there is in fact no other way to work, as there will never be enough money to have other people do this work for you. But beside this, I enjoy doing all this and having contact with so many people around the world.

The greatest difficulty I've encountered with Cut is sales: how to sell enough to make the next production possible. This is an ongoing challenge, though with time more people know the label and it becomes easier to find distribution.

The artworks of the Cut CDs you create show clearly that you enjoy running the label. It is interesting to hear that you had silkscreened the packages yourself one by one in the earlier days. What are the important aspects for the Cut artworks?

My design aesthetic for Cut reflects my overall approach to the label: elegant pragmatism. I appreciate design and work procedures in general which reflect a certain consciousness of energy and motion; of not wasting but also of not being boring about finding simple solutions.

Speaking specifically about the Cut CD sleeve artwork (and my graphic work in general) I would say the designs parallel certain aspects of my work with sound: rhythm, repetition, space and place.

The minimal aesthetics which makes the label presentations coherent in the artworks' packaging penetrates the Cut website as well. However, the information on the website seemed lacking when I once reviewed an album on Cut. Don't you think that disclosing information by artists and/or publishing their interviews in the website is useful in encouraging the listeners' thoughts, and helps to provide them

with the possibilities of discussion? Does your methodology demonstrate that you prefer delivering sounds to people first, rather than to supplying them with information that might give them some preconceptions about the sound works?

Personally, I don't find the artists' information presented on the Cut website to be inadequate.

Most of the artists have a link to their own site. From there it would easily be possible to find more information about the artist. In addition, all reviews of each CD release are listed on the website. I feel that having interviews with the artists on the website would just be too much clutter.

Your question about my methodology—preferring to deliver sounds first and avoiding preconceptions—is definitely true. I don't want to label the work I am publishing, nor do I want people to think of the artists as coming from a particular genre. What is most important is for listeners to decide for themselves. Just to listen.

Almost all the releases on Cut seem by the artists who have been closely in touch with the owner Jason Kahn. This seems an uncommon situation for a label to run for nine years since its foundation. Will Cut maintain these close relationships? The notice in the Cut website stating that it currently does not receive any demo seems to imply that the label will not change its stance. I would like to ask you about how much you are interested in “discovering” talented but less well-known artists who were totally strangers to you in the demos and introducing their works to the listeners. Will this require another label other than Cut?

In terms of introducing or even "discovering" (I'm not sure if this is actually possible) new or less well-known artists, I would have to say that this has already been the case with several Cut releases, though this was never a goal of mine. I tend to just release work I admire. Often I personally know the artists, but in many cases I haven't.

Tu 'm's recording was in fact their first-ever CD release. Jason Lescalleet's "Mattresslessness" was his first full-length solo CD release. The "Momentan-def." CD with Tomas Korber, Steinbrüchel and Günter Müller was the first release for this group and presented Steinbrüchel and Tomas Korber to a different listening audience than they'd hitherto been exposed to. Tomas Korber's "effacement" was his first full-length solo CD release and Olivia Block is way underexposed in my opinion, though she is by no means unknown.

I don't see myself as a "professional" label owner looking to find the next new trend. I am mainly interested in promoting work I would enjoy hearing myself, regardless of whether the artist is known or unknown, young or old, electronic or acoustic. Perhaps for this reason many of the Cut releases are from people I have some contact with. Releasing a CD is also a social occasion for me. I am not in "business," so I really need the social contact and feedback from the people I work with. It would be hard for me to imagine just getting a demo from someone I don't know, have never heard of and, even if I really liked the music, of releasing it. This would just be too impersonal for me.

Beyond this, though, I discourage the sending of demos mainly because I just don't

have the time to listen to them. Also, Cut generally only has two or three releases per year, and this number of productions is easily filled by my own contacts and interests. I think the growing number of mp3 labels is a great way for lesser-known people to expose their work. Personally, I would not like to have an mp3 label as I am still fixed on the idea of publishing an object, as anachronistic as this notion might seem today. In general, it is difficult for me to decide what I would like to release as I am working with a very limited budget and amount of time to run the label. I often learn of very interesting and less well-known artists whose work I would like to release; but I just can't. As you put it here, this will probably require "another label than Cut." But not another label which I am going to start. I just don't have the time or financial resources for that.

I heard that your last tour in Japan and Korea with four improvisers from Switzerland was implemented with the financial sponsorship by Swiss Arts Council. I would like to ask you something about the communication between the experimental music and the art scenes in Switzerland. How active is the interaction between those two fields? Are there the symposia and other discourses across these two disciplines you are involved in?

There is some overlap between experimental music and the art scenes in Switzerland. But not much, as far as I know. The people at leerraum (<http://leerraum.ch>) in Bern are presenting sound installations, as well as releasing CD's and DVD's. There are also some festivals, such as Archipel in Geneva, where sound installations are being presented. In general, though, I would say in Switzerland there could be more exchange between these different worlds. My sound installations are usually presented in the context of a musical event rather than in the world of visual art, though I personally see my installations as having more in common with the latter than the former.

You maintain good relationships with some musicians in Japan like Taku Sugimoto and Toshimaru Nakamura, whose recordings were released on Cut. Tell us about the last tour in Japan and Korea. Did you find any changes around the Japanese experimental music scene? Also, I must ask you this: did you bring back any harvest that might reflect on Cut label's future plans?

My recent tour in Japan and Korea was great. I especially enjoyed having the chance of playing in Seoul, as this was something new and fresh for me. I am also a great fan of Korean food!

I didn't really notice any changes in the Japanese experimental scene; but then I didn't really have much time to spend talking with many of the artists. I had at one point during the tour 11 days with no break (playing, recording). So, unfortunately my schedule was too hectic to have an in-depth look at the music scene in Japan. I would love to come back and have more time to meet and talk with more Japanese artists. I have no future releases on Cut of artists I met on my recent tour in Japan, though I will

say it was a great pleasure to have the chance of meeting Toshiya Tsunoda, whose recordings I admire very much; and of having the chance to play with Takefumi Naoshima. Unfortunately, we had no time to record together. I think he is doing great work and I hope to hear more from him in the future.

I guess the tours you have frequently as an artist in many different places make many occasions to talk face-to-face to not only other artists and organizers/curators but also people at record shops/distributors and journalists working there. Do you actually feel increasing interest in experimental music and sound art in the regions where they had been hard to be accepted?

I definitely feel there is a growing acceptance and interest in experimental work with audio. I'm especially encouraged by the number of people I've met in my travels who are not just interested in sound within a musical context but also as something akin to a "visual art," where sound is worked with as a plastic medium; thinking of sound in terms of space or its social function.

I'm not sure which regions you are referring to, where experimental work with audio previously found little acceptance. In the grand scale of things, I don't think this experimental work is better accepted anywhere nowadays than it was several years ago. The biggest change seems merely to be people's conception of sound.

Carl Stone, Christophe Charles, Terre Thaemlitz, etc. They are the composers/sound artists from Europe or US who settled in Japan and run their own activities there. There is also a Frenchman who founded an experimental record label in Tokyo. It is clear that this phenomenon and vice versa are getting less and less uncommon. A US-born artist/label organizer Jason Kahn had moved from his home country to Germany and is currently based in Zürich. Then, is it an enticing idea that he lives in Japan or has two homes both in Europe and Japan someday in the future?

As much as I like Japan, I have no plans to live there. I have no idea how I would support myself in Japan. I have two children and one more is on the way. If I moved to anywhere it would be back to Los Angeles.

This subject has nothing directly to do with your label. I (and possibly many other Japanese) am baffled by the idea of some western people trying to relate music and art in Japan to zen. Even nowadays there seem not a small number of people in US and Europe looking for "mysteries of the Orient" in the Japanese experimental music. I would like to hear your opinion about this issue.

This is not the first time I've been asked this question or found myself in this discussion. I don't personally feel that, at least with the Japanese artists I've worked with or myself, there has been any conscious motivation or influence from zen. Nor have we ever discussed this (unless we were laughing about some stupid journalist asking for the 100th time how zen had an influence on Japanese artists' work). Beyond this, I would like to ask "what is zen?" Who are these people who pretend to know what

zen is and how can they attribute the qualities of something they assume to know about to another culture's (Japan) art? Just reading about zen doesn't mean one knows what zen is; nor does going to a tea ceremony or meditating in a zen monastery or listening to Japanese music.

What is zen? I don't know.

Do you have a wall at home covered with a pile of records and CDs? What do you listen to at home? Please list five of your favorite albums.

Actually, I only have a small cabinet filled with some CD's and records. I don't listen to too much music at home, as when I have some free time I am mainly working on my own music.

I don't like favorite album lists, so I won't give one here. One artist whose work I've enjoyed very much lately is Asher. I've listened to some of his recordings at home recently. Some of his releases can be found at

<http://www.con-v.org/cnv%20r07.htm>

<http://www.con-v.org/cnv22.htm>

and some of his music on-line at

<http://www.12k.com/term/term11.htm>

What are the future plans of Cut and of yourself?

I have three releases planned for Cut in the near future: a recording by Seth Nehil and John Grzinich, a recording by myself and Argentine pianist Gabriel Paiuk, and a solo recording from Günter Müller.

As for myself, I will be working this summer on a solo recording and investigating some new ideas for an upcoming sound installation I have planned in Cairo this September, where I will be staying for the whole month. After this I think that I will have a lot of baby sitting to do.