

**Once Upon a Poolside**  
**Interviewed by Deanna Radford**  
**October 2005**

Originally a percussionist, Zürich-based u.s. expatriate Jason Kahn spent many years honing his craft as a musician in punk rock bands (his band The Leaving Trains recorded for the venerable SST label), and by studying all varieties of percussion in the u.s., London and Paris. Kahn explains that he “later began to incorporate live electronics into his playing, currently performing using laptop, analogue synthesizer, or combining these with percussion.” Kahn has a dynamic career as a creator, sound artist and improviser, having worked with Evan Parker, Christian Marclay, Steve Roden, Send + Receive alumnus Otomo Yoshihide, Sachiko M. and others. Jason Kahn runs the CD label cut, has performed worldwide and composed works for dance and theatre. For Send + Receive, Kahn gives a live performance, as well as a workshop on small sound composition and recording, and an installation, Glengarry Block Stairwell.

**Poolside:** Does the element of narrative, however abstract that might be, ever come into the picture for you when you are creating a sound piece? When you perform?

**Jason Kahn:** In both cases here — performance and sound pieces (installation, radio, internet, etc.) — narrative doesn’t really play a role. I see myself as creating an environment for the listener to enter. I am very inspired by environmental sound and try to view my performative and composed work in the context of this: this is to say, sound without narrative, without impetus. I don’t want to tell a story, rather, create a place.

**Poolside:** You strive to create a sense of atmosphere with your work. Should your approach be more poetic than technical, does your approach change depending on what medium you’re working within (performance, installation, radio works)? What might be some of your favourite ways to work towards this?

**Jason Kahn:** Whatever is technical for me in my work is there only by necessity. I’m not really very interested in the technical component, beyond the fact that it allows me to convey my ideas. I’m also not sure if I could term my work “poetic” (in the sense that I understand this term). I really try to think of my work as if I were walking down the street and heard an inspiring juxtaposition of different sounds. I wouldn’t say “Ahh, the sound of the wind blowing through the leaves of that tree is poetic.” Perhaps beautiful, but not poetic.

I try to keep the same approach, or rather the same sensibility, whether I am performing or creating a sound work. Of course, I know very well that when a room full of people is listening to me I cannot create in the same way as when sitting

at home in front of the computer. But this is my intent and my starting point.

Above all, I want the technological aspect of my work, whether an installation or a performance, to be transparent: I don't want people to concentrate on how the work is made, rather, just the sound.

**Poolside:** You work with and create small sounds. This contributes to a certain way an active listener must partake. With this in mind, might you view this as a political act or political way of establishing voice... creation of space?

**Jason Kahn:** I wouldn't claim my work to be political, as the concept of politics seems to change from person to person. I would say, however, that my work has a social component in that I am interested in people taking the time to actively listen to the sounds around them. Placed in the context of western industrialized societies, where the average person is continuously bombarded with sound and image, the mere of idea of stopping and listening could be viewed as a way of people re-discovering the environment or even an aspect of oneself, which has been thwarted by years of sensory saturation.

Beyond the idea of listening, is the factor of time. So many of us today live under constant time pressure and the pace of daily life is constantly accelerating. My work needs time and attention to reveal itself. It is not for people in a hurry.

The other night I performed here in Zürich. My neighbour came to listen. She has no context for what I am doing, but after the performance she told me how nice it was to just listen and that she hadn't done this for such a long time. And this basically sums up what I am trying to do.

**Poolside:** How might this intermingle with your background as an improvising musician and the performer/audience dynamic?

**Jason Kahn:** In terms of my activities as an improvising musician, my work with environmental sound and sound installations has had a direct impact on how I perform and collaborate with other musicians. I like to think of the music as something without a beginning or end (of course, I know that, strictly speaking, this isn't true), and I am somewhere in the middle of the course of sound events. This is to say: I want to let the sound envelop me and develop of its own accord. Of course, the musicians are guiding the music but my intent is to move away from gesture, from drama, from narrative, from meaning.