Sygma
Interviewed by Daniel Burygin
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Daniel Burygin: Throughout your creative years, you have switched a few times to completely different types of music making. What makes you undertake such big footsteps and what, in your view, do you achieve from that?

Jason Kahn: In the beginning, I was interested in rhythm, in rock, it was my context. I did it for many years, and then I was interested in other things like getting deeper into the sound of drums in electronics. Going into electronics was another area of sound, and then working with voice was like another area of electronics for me. But there's no plan. There is a difference, because, obviously, the synthesizer is different from a drum set, but it's still me, the same interest in sound, the same person behind the sound. But if you look back at my whole history, it's maybe different stations but it's still the same journey.

Daniel Burygin: Were the 90's a somewhat turning point for you?

Jason Kahn: In the 80s I was playing in more rock and improvised groups, but not really aligned to any style. When I got to Berlin in 1990 I was interested in both improvised music, especially in East Berlin, and dance music. They might come across as two different worlds, but actually, they did come together. If you look in the scene in Cologne, they were doing very experimental work with electronics and improvising from the early 90s.
And perhaps more than this, in the 1990's, living in Berlin, this was the frst time in my life that I had enough time to devote to my praxis, to really think about what I was doing, to "woodshed," if you will. And all this had to do with the political situation in Berlin with the wall coming down. This opened up a lot of cheap places to live, cheap spaces to do one's art in or present music, etc. Only because of this, of placing myself in the middle of this were the 1990's a turning point for me -- less because of any musical reasons than because of this living situation in Berlin.

Daniel Burygin: What did it feel like around Berlin experimental music scene at that moment? Did this new real-time improvisation feel like something special on a global scale?

Jason Kahn: There are so many different fields of improvising. I wasn't interested in so-called "real-time" music (Echtzeitmusik) or reductive improvising at all. I found it very polarizing and dogmatic. It was the antithesis of everything I liked about improvising, I didn't feel any freedom in it, only constriction and a very limited set of ideas. Also, there was always an assumption that, when you play with someone, you would have to play a certain way: quiet, very few notes. For me, this is like living in a cage.
Of course, the press grabs onto this, because it's a very clear style, it's easy to write about. The press always needs something to write about and they need a label to write about it with. In Berlin it was Echtzeit, in Tokyo they called it Onkyo, in London it was New London Silence, in the US a guy with a record label thinks up another term, EAI. This all means nothing, in my

opinion. It's just different people staking their territories so that they can advance their cause. I don't see what this has to do with music, per se.

Daniel Burygin: But we're talking about a certain community with a certain aesthetic, that probably no everyone in the improvised scene shared. What did you like from that time?

Jason Kahn: In Tokyo a lot of things were going on which I liked. I was working there almost every year all through the 90s. When I went there the first time in 1994, Otomo Yoshihide had a festival of experimental improvised music, mostly with local musicians. The variety was mind-blowing, there were people doing minimal things or totally weird things, like a guy playing extended harmonica but wearing a business suit as if he just got of from work. They didn't think much about the categories, it was very fluent.
Some people in Berlin I thought were really great, like Axel Doerner or Peter Hollinger. Other people, I felt, couldn't do anything else, so they went for this so-called "reductionist" style. They were trying to act like they had some kind of classical influence, trying to add some sense of importance to what they were doing. But in fact, I felt that a lot of times it was just bluffing. I didn't get the sense of any substance as opposed to stance.

Daniel Burygin: Still, a certain method was developing globally, which later evolved in a number of styles. What, in your opinion, was crucial in the formation of this method or a group of methods?

Jason Kahn: I think this type of music had a lot to do with the development of new electronic music. Many acoustic musicians were interested in this disembodied approach of making music. Of course, you don't play an electronic instrument the way you play, for example, a saxophone. So I think this got translated to conventional instruments, using them not as they were intended for, re-contextualizing and rethinking the idea of instrumental technique.

Daniel Burygin: Would you agree that the sound has become the cornerstone for this kind of improvising?

Jason Kahn: Perhaps, yes. But for me sound is not enough, there has to be some structure to the sound and in some instances even a certain social connection in the way you approach the sound. For instance, when I do compositions, it's more about people and social spaces than about music. Music or sound is often for me just a way of thinking about social spaces. If sound itself were just enough I would never bother to make music, as the sounds I encounter everyday as I move through my life would certainly be enough. There is so much beauty even in the most mundane of sounds -- many people just don't realize this as they're too busy with their phones or listening to music on headphones. They've cut themselves of from the world. They don't know what they're missing. It's a shame but also something I fell that is very destructive for society in general.

Daniel Burygin: What is the most interesting thing you right now in making music?

Jason Kahn: For me personally, after many years of working in sound-focused direction, using computers and electronics to explore the resonance of spaces, to take all that experience and use it in the way I might have played 20 years ago. On the face of it, you could say that it's a very traditional free improvised or free jazz kind of playing I'm turning to now, but for me my current methodology is influenced by everything that I've done before.

So, it's interesting for me to see people returning to old approaches but with a different vantage point. I often hear players who never experienced what I did – they just kept their direction all through the 90s and 2000s. I'm not judging them, but I feel they missed what has been going. For them to keep the way they were going is not the same as for someone else to approach that with a different experience. This is something I really appreciated about Derek Bailey -- he was so open to new playing partners, new directions of music. Of course, one could argue that he always played the same each time, but I don't think so. I think he approached each situation anew, even if he used the same techniques. Seeing him the first time in 198 and then the last time in 1998 with two drum and bass DJ's makes a case in point.

That's what interests me right now: retrying what one used to do before but with new eyes (and ears). We can achieve much through re-contextualizing our practice.

Daniel Burygin: Do you see anything else besides that in contemporary music that you find interesting and refreshing?

Jason Kahn: For a long time, there's been talk about this term, "sound art." It's been used a lot, it's being taught in universities. There has been this notion that music is something inferior and limiting, whereas "sound art" is something liberating. It's interesting how today musicians approach the idea of music with more the notion of how they can expand its concept, work with it -- not just walk away from it or try to create a new idea, such as "sound art." It's like Morton Feldman once wrote when he had a crisis, that he didn't know for sure whether music was really art, whether they were on the same level. I believe they are. This was perhaps for me John Cage's greatest contribution, expanding the idea of what music is and bringing it to that level where we can think of it in terms of art again.

For the last 20 years, it's become a notion that we don't need to expand this idea, we need to create a new one. But "sound art" isn't even a new idea, we know it from the 0s', from Max Neuhaus, or even earlier, from Russolo. But even Russolo thought in musical terms. What bothers me about this notion of "sound art" today is this sense that it's superior to music, that perhaps even we don't need music anymore. I'm interested in how people are looking for new ways of thinking about what is music. Even if it's not new.

Many people tell me that I'm doing "sound art." I reject this. If we're going to move the conversation to an art context, then I would prefer to be called a visual artist – especially as what I'm working with, thinking about, is not so much sound but the concept of space. I use sound to work with space, both as a physical and conceptual medium.

Daniel Burygin: How does it correlate with the idea of an experiment? Is the term experimental music even relevant to what you describe?

Jason Kahn: Experimental for me means that I don't know the outcome of what I'm doing. Personally, I like to put myself in a position where I feel like I could fail or at the very least where I'm not sure what is going to happen. I'm more interested in the process of trying out new ideas, but It's not something I have to force myself into.

Luckily, I keep being interested in new things. I've been working with the voice for a few years, still working with electronics, always trying to combine or revisit things. Experimentation for me is being open to new ideas, approaches, contexts. I'm not into doing something new for the sake of being new because I don't think there's anything new really. You might repeat yourself but in a new way. For instance, I felt like I wanted to try ideas from electronic music with voice, to use my voice the way I would play a synthesizer. I know it's not new because I know Joan La Barbara, Phil Minton, and so many others were doing things with the voice in similar ways. But it's not about that, it's about personal expression.

Daniel Burygin: You seem to have a focus on the specific conditions that impact our perception, internal or external. That includes site-specific works, both musical and installational. Does this all come from the urge to search for and to grasp the very essence of perception?

Jason Kahn: For me this concept of perception seems to be at the crux of many problems and possibilities for society in general. Reading Lefebvre and Merleau-Ponty made me realize how important -- and fascinating -- this nexus point between perception and the concepts of space is. Therefore, I felt a kind of need or even obligation to pursue this and think more about these ideas in my work.

Daniel Burygin: Do you feel that today you use the electronic setup (particularly analog synthesizer) in a different way as opposed to 10-15 years ago?

Jason Kahn: When I started working with electronics over twenty years ago I was perhaps more interested in being able to control the sounds I could produce. As my knowledge and technical skill over these instruments grew, I realized how much more interesting it could be to relinquish this control, to let things go, or to use instruments and systems in ways they were initially not meant to be used. In short: technical problems, errors and mistakes became more important as modus operandi and material.

Still later, parallel to my fascination with the ideas of space I began to work more with feedback systems. This took the form of acoustical approaches (working with electronics and amplified percussion creating feedback in acoustical spaces) but also thinking of the internal space of feedback, feeding, for example, my synthesizer back into itself and using its own signal to modify itself.

These are ways of working I wasn't conceptually prepared for or even technically able to try when I first started working with electronics.

Daniel Burygin: Your vocal works create a certain perception and an interpersonal contact, which is so intense and direct, it's almost scary. Is it the main objective of relying solely on the vocal medium -- to put yourself on the edge, in this extreme position?

Jason Kahn: Perhaps in the beginning there was this notion of using my voice to put myself in a very vulnerable, unstable situation. But, of course, after a few years perhaps I've become used to this "vulnerability" and I no longer feel as unstable, having improved my technique -- though I would by no means define myself as a "singer."
Still, I do think this idea of seeing somebody work with their voice in an abstract way, unmediated by technology (amplification) and just sitting there in front of an audience has something very powerful and direct and connecting -- both for me as a performer and for the audience.

Daniel Burygin: Today I personally see two opposite tendencies in experimental musical field: one is trying to enrich music with new electronic sounds (let's call it technological approach), the other is the liberation from the physicality of sound, basically fleeing from it into other areas, whether it's the sense of time in composition or social and political activism or anthropological research, etc.
Would it be fair to say that at certain point you switched from a more formalistic sonic approach to work with other aspects of sound?

Jason Kahn: I can't say that I ever "switched." I think all aspects are important and interesting: the political, the social, the sonic, the aesthetic. All these contexts combine (or not). We can work with it all or none of it. I don't feel like there is one way, one "right" approach. I feel my greatest task is to be open to all these contexts and to any new ones I might encounter along the way.

Daniel Burygin: What do you think about how ego is related to music? Is it utopian to assume that music can be completely deprived of egocentric qualities and become, say, purely intellectual?

Jason Kahn: Well, in my opinion, our ego is just our personality, our identity or individuality. That's important because it's our voice. We make music in a certain way because of our ego. For many people ego is just a negative term, meaning to be self-centered. I think ego is natural, everyone has it and it's what makes us human, individual.
However, when our ego becomes the most important thing, causing us to ignore or abuse our environment or other people, then in my opinion it becomes a problem. Even in generative music a human being creates a system for the music to produce itself -- for example, they wrote a software, which is an expression of their ego. It would be hard for me to imagine being purely intellectual, like a machine, cold, egoless. I feel like it's human to be emotional. Being completely without ego sounds kind of romantic to me, like when westerners try to imagine the word "Zen."

Daniel Burygin: What keeps you going, then?

Jason Kahn: I never chose to be a musician, I just felt like I had to do it, like a calling. As soon as I started playing drums I knew that's what I wanted to do. It's not an expression of my ideas or my desire to be free, it's just the desire to do it. And it's certainly not about getting money. A lot of people my age -- I'm 57 -- that I still know, they don't listen to music anymore. I still love music, all different kinds. So I'm not compelled for any reason, I'm just lucky that I am like I am.