

“On Metal Shore”

Line notes to a solo LP from Jason Kahn

2011

The idea for “On Metal Shore” goes back to the 2008 collaboration “Vista” with Boston artist Asher. The genesis of this piece was early morning recordings I made on the shores of the Lake of Zurich in 2007, where I played some very resonant steel railings with my hands. There was something magical for me about being down by the water an hour or so before sunrise. My hands were freezing and as I played a flock of birds in a tree nearby would fly away from my noise (even though I wasn't playing very loudly) and then re-group again only minutes later, repeating the whole process over and over again during the course of the recording. I had the sense that I was engaging with the environment on several levels, from the give and take of the birds to the rising sound levels of my playing in response to the incoming waves lapping at the concrete retaining wall below the steel railing.

I wanted to re-visit this approach with “On Metal Shore,” which takes its title from this first experience on the shores of the Lake of Zurich playing with metal railings. “On Metal Shore” was recorded from 2008-2010. The composition uses not only recordings made of me playing found metal constructions outside but studio recordings of various metal objects and percussion instruments being vibrated with sound waves played through different types of transducers. In a sense, then, “On Metal Shore” is a composition about percussion, but not only. It's also about the idea of “playing” with an environment and taking my percussionist's skills outside the studio and into uncontrolled situations.

Some of the other location recordings for “On Metal Shore” were made at the Binaural Residency in Nodar, Portugal, where I found some water tanks with good sounding metal ladders welded to them. More lakeside recordings were made, this time on the shores of the Lake of Luzern, while on another residency at the Haus am See in Horw. In this case, a small dock nearby the house where I was staying had a line of steel railings which were incredibly resonant and played nicely with the water quietly splashing against the nearby boats and the dock's wooden piles. At a construction site in Oerlikon, a suburb of Zurich, I found some long metal pipes which I recorded with the microphones placed deep inside, tapping lightly on the pipes with my fingers. The rumble of passing trains running parallel to the site provided a good juxtaposition to my playing. And at a school nearby where I live I found a drainage pipe closed off with a large plate of steel, which responded to the lightest of playing with a soft mallet. In the distance, water running down another pipe offered a strong contrast to the ringing tones of the steel plate.

In my studio I set up a mini version of my installation “Wires (2008)” and experimented with various frequencies of sound waves vibrating the steel wires, recording this in front of tin can resonators attached to the wires. I also made recordings of other metal objects and drums activated with various transducers, ranging from small piezo elements to large “bass shakers.”

I had never set out to compose a piece for percussion, but I guess in the end this is “What On Metal Shore” is, though perhaps not just about the sound of percussion but about the idea of how and where I play it, be it outside or in the studio, with my hands or without, set vibrating by the oscillation of sound waves or accompanied by a flock of birds or the sound of water.