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Billy Bultheel: Music Strikes an Area not a Point

INTERVIEW ENGLISH MUSIC PERFORMANCE HALLE FÜR KUNST STEIERMARK

BILLY BULTHEEL SCHINKEL PAVILLON

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Text by Steph Holl-Trieu

By rendering sonic kinships between heavy electronics, noise, polyphonic Baroque and medieval music, **BILLY BULTHEEL** \nearrow conceives of site-specific compositions which act as algorithmic blueprints for choreographed sonic architectures.

Since 2012, Billy Bultheel has worked in close collaboration as a performer and composer for Anne Imhof, and has composed music for the choreographer Michele Rizzo. His performance and music projects have been presented by Schinkel Pavillon (2019), KW Institute for Contemporary Art (2019), PAF Olomouc (2020) and the 7th Athens Biennale (2021). His most recent work »UNTER KAMMERMUSIK«, a collaboration with artist Viviana Abelson, was shown on November 19 as part of the performance series »Give Rise To« curated by Cathrin Mayer for HALLE FÜR KUNST Steiermark. On this occasion, he spoke with Steph Holl-Trieu about music as a system outside the flux of time, instruments and performers becoming choreographic machines and collaboration as a mode of production.

UNTER \nearrow was first performed in Berlin as part of the series Disappearing Berlin at an indoor swimming pool, in Graz UNTER KAMMERMUSIK \nearrow will take place inside the Styrian Armoury (Landeszeughaus). How has the piece changed in dialogue with its new environment and how was this location chosen?

I came here first in August to meet with Cathrin Mayer and check out the location. She proposed it. When we arrived, I didn't know yet what I wanted to do. The original idea was to write a new piece directly adapted to the location, and only later did I propose to perform the same piece. Partly because I was overwhelmed by the second half of 2021, with so many projects happening all at once which got postponed from the last lockdown. And secondly, because I have recently become more interested in finding ways to recycle and adapt my work to different contexts. Not seeing one piece as a unit, but rather having a liquid approach to my work. Baroque composers had a strong habit of recycling their themes and ideas, swapping them between operas, masses and chamber music, I like that.

Would you say you're trying to make your work more modular?

I think of it as creating an arsenal or archive of bits, which you can continuously recombine.

Speaking of arsenal, when I read the press text I had to think of the German media theorist Friedrich Kittler, who wrote an essay called »Rock Music: A Misuse of Military Equipment«. In this text, he traces the genealogies of sound technology such as tape machines, stereophony, synthesizers, vocoders, amplifiers and radio through their prefiguration in systems tried, tested, and disseminated in times of war. So, when you hear a tape hiss you also hear the sound of the jet engine. Was the theme of war machines something that has been of interest to you before or is that something that you were confronted with by the venue?

The field of inquiry into war technology and music is vast and well-known. When I was studying electronic music, there was always a strong awareness of the history of war in technological advancement. All brass instruments for example are derived from war technology, the same applies to the development of valves and bells, or the theremin if you think about electronic music. This history even reaches down to the layer of industrial copper production.

It's something that I've worked on in the past with a piece called SIGNS OF INVASION \nearrow . It took inspiration from Karlheinz Stockhausen's composition called »Signals to Invasion«, a solo for trombone, which is made up of an archive of war cries or calls performed in loops. The piece was performed at Ku'damm-Karree, an empty office building in the middle of West Berlin. I wanted to make a site-specific piece about a group of people, who got stranded and were taking shelter inside of this complex. The music was performed for the cityscape in front of them without a direct address to the audience, treating them as mere witnesses. It was an attempt to create contact with something that is unseen or unknown. The text written for this performance by MILOŠ TRAKILOVIĆ took up on the idea of the horizon and its codification as a war zone. In the sense that one thinks of the horizon as the end of one's eyesight, and so one would assume the distance of the ability to colonize is determined by vision – but the sound of your trumpet actually reaches even further, so sound is a far more pernicious technology for conquest and territorialisation.

This leads us to the question of how sound inhabits or even produces an experience of space. It strikes me that, consciously or unconsciously, you seem to translate the decentering of vision by disrupting a unidirectional conception of the relationship between performers and their audience.

I think a lot about the places where music happens and want to break away from the centrality of the band playing for an audience and instead try to place music in a certain context, where different ways of engaging with it are made possible. It's an ongoing research project. THE MINUTES OF OLOMOUC \nearrow , for example, marked the beginning of my journey into finding ways to mediate performance, taking it out of its live context and digesting it as an online form. It became a directed livestream, where both camera people became active participants in the choreography. Later I felt that the directed camera took away from the experience of the viewer, only allowing them to become passively dragged along with the eye of the camera. So, in the second part of my research, I worked on the NFT series SONGS FOR THE CONTRACT \nearrow , where viewers could directly interact with the piece.

I remember having to drag a crystal ball to change perspective and clicking on it to be led into a different room, which would actually turn out to be the same room, but at a different time of day and with a different configuration of instruments and performers. You completely lose yourself in this distorted loop. It uncannily and renders impossible a linear experience of time.

The project was specifically about killing the linearity of time. It was important that it all happened in one room at different times of the day. Some of them were filmed at 10 AM in the morning, others at 2 AM at night. It mirrored the experience of lockdown, the feeling of being in the same room and constantly waking up again at a different time, losing track of what time of day it is, but conserving the feeling that time has passed. I liked the idea that this piece was held captive in this strange room, which would then get locked somewhere in cyberspace.

The way you speak about this piece makes me think about Iannis Xenakis' notion of music as existing both in space outside of time and within the impalpable temporal flux.

Iannis Xenakis is a huge influence on me. He had such an architectural mind. What I find so refreshing about him is that he didn't think of music as an art form that only lives within the medium of time. He formalised music as an emergent, algorithmic system, which self-generates from interconnecting parts. This has greatly influenced my work between performance and music: performers are set into a system, in which the variables are formed through their relationships to each other. So, music doesn't exist by being written down on a timeline but instead takes shape through their mutual interactions.

It's interesting how you emphasise the architectural quality in his work because I've noticed it as an underlying current or substratum to your own practice. For example, when I think about SONGS FOR ATHENS \nearrow , and the way you mapped the building through choreography, or how you've built sculptural installations of deconstructed instruments onto which the performers' bodies are mapped.

I'm interested in how one can relocate movement, which is also the idea behind the instrumental scaffolding structure I've been building. I wanted to find out how a drum machine could become a choreography machine. For example, when Steve [Katona] hits the drum pads in WHEN DOVES CRY \nearrow like a mad person, it almost becomes more of a battle sport; or how Alex[ander lezzi] in The Minutes of Olomouc, is lying down and has to hit the drum pad in a very desperate way. These gestures all emerge out of a system, an abstract situation, which nevertheless makes all the emotions visible and readable.

In fact, Athens was the third part of my research into mediated performance. It was supposed to take shape as a guided tour, where the audience would be separated into four different groups and led through separate parts of the building. We ended up filming it, each one of us with a GoPro strapped to our head, at times moving independently through the rooms, and then coming together again. Even when we were separated, we concentrated on the location of the other performers. The larger idea behind this was for the building to become a kind of polyphonic instrument, where the storytelling isn't centralised, but rather emerges out of a multiplicity of voices and narratives holding equal weight.

Your music often feels like a deep dive into past archives of Baroque or medieval music, but what you resurface can't really be described as futuristic. Instead, it's something that appears to fall out of time. I wonder whether it's because you primarily extract a methodology. Is it possible for you to pinpoint what drew you to these techniques?

I think that, especially with medieval polyphony, the way people were writing music back then was very algorithmic. They had similar ideas to Xenakis in the sense that they were thinking of generative systems to compose music. The reason for this was that they didn't have enough resources, particularly scrolls of paper, to write long scores. So, they had to write small systems, almost like riddles, which could generate something larger. That's how we got isorhythms for example, a medieval algorithmic compositional technique, or the canon. It's funny how technically simple the canon is, you learn it as a kid, but you never think about it in terms of being an algorithm.

Do you use similar notational methods? How do you write scores, and more specifically how do you use them as a basis for collaboration?

It's really a mix. I do write notes on paper and usually have a certain melodic or harmonic framework that I like and tend towards, but this serves more as a guide for experimentation. For »UNTER KAMMERMUSIK«, especially working with the flute players, I had this very abstract idea of wanting to bend the tones as if they were in a dance. So, I wrote down ten two-part melodies and we experimented with them in a workshop structure, trying out what would happen if, for instance, they modified the way they were breathing or tilted their head in a different direction. It's not a traditional approach to working with musicians, but if you find the right people, they almost prefer it.

This also explains why most of your work is based on long-term collaborations.

Once you find good musicians, you form a friendship and they become so much part of your work. Generally, I think collaboration is a really big part of my practice, whether I work for other people or other people work for me. I feel like the kind of work that I want to do I cannot do alone. Take for example this piece with Viviana, she's an amazing sculptor and a visual artist, and I lack her skills as a performance-maker and composer. We're both specialised in our own field, so we never stepped on each other's toes. Working together like this is really supportive in the way that it takes a lot of weight off your shoulders. Especially compared to when you're working on your own and no one is there to question your ideas, it's just stressful. Collaboration functions like a mirror, you see your own practice through the eyes of someone else and suddenly all the decisions become so clear.

»UNTER KAMMERMUSIK« was performed on November 19, 2021, at Landeszeughaus in Graz by Alexander lezzi, Rebecca Lane, Jie Ren Lim and Adam Sinclair. It was commissioned by HALLE FÜR KUNST Steiermark. The first chapter, »UNTER«, was organised by Schinkel Pavillon in Berlin in cooperation with Radial System performance program and performed at Wellenbad am Spreewaldplatz.

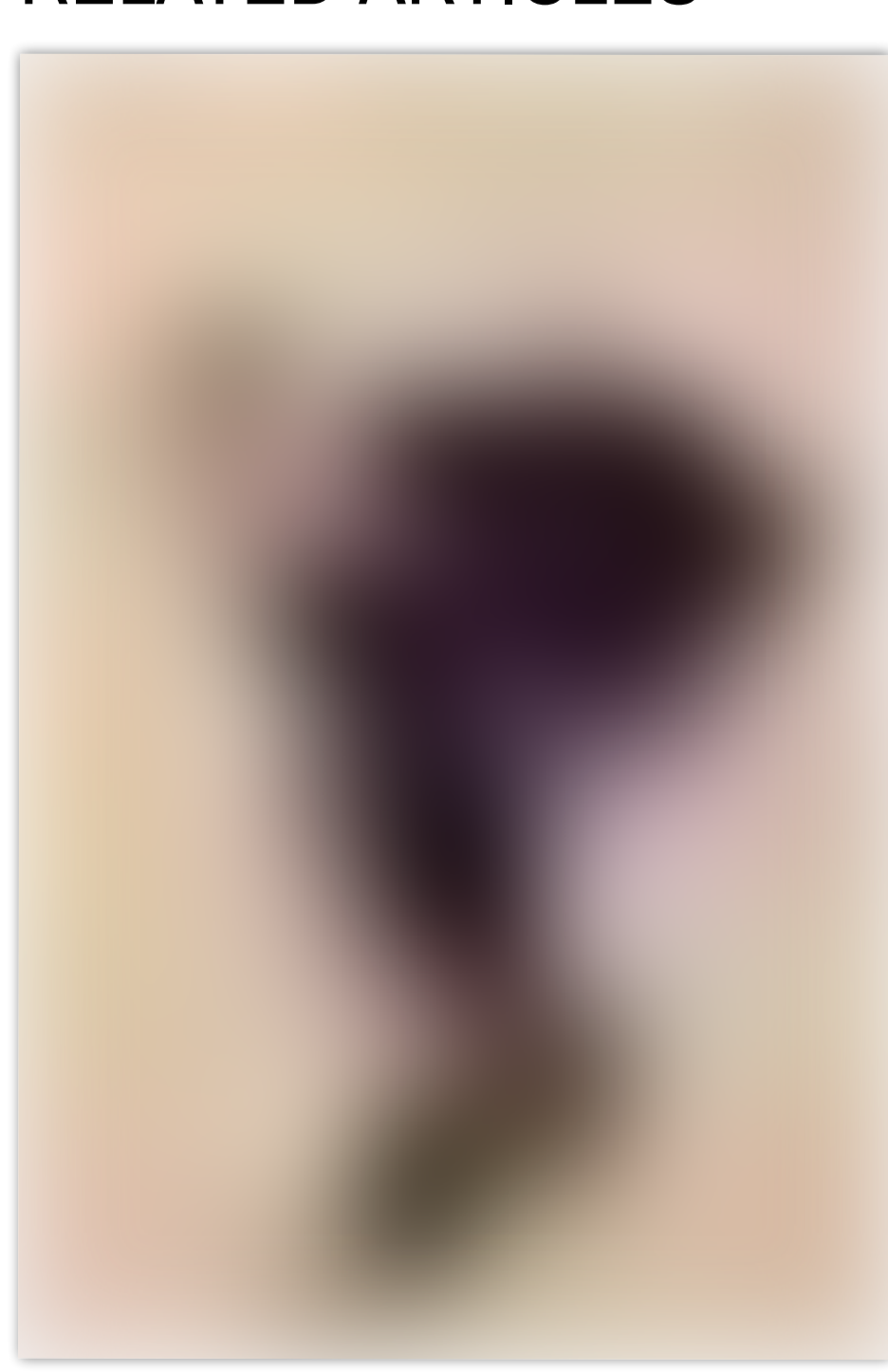
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