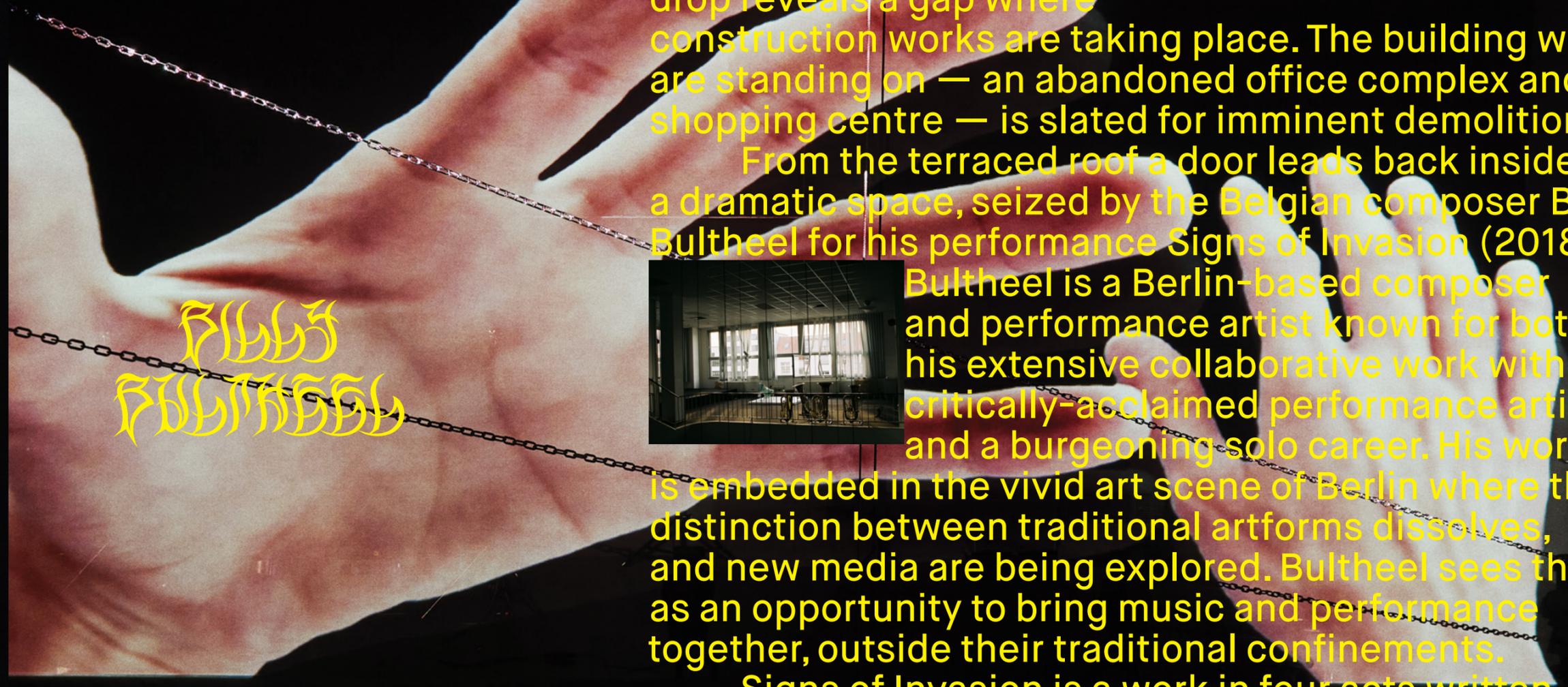


THE ART OF NOISE. A new era for the epic has arrived. With the current upsurge of grandiose performance works in museum spaces, new approaches to music are making their way to the grand halls of contemporary art. One of its new occupants is the composer and performance artist Billy Bultheel. *Words by curator Thomas Butler.*



Standing on the rooftop of a building in West Berlin. The sun has set. The sky above is electric blue. Clouds, tinged yellow from the city lights below, float here and there. The wind whips around my head and there's an uneasy chill to the autumn air. A crowd gathers to watch a solitary trumpet player standing on the edge of a concrete roof.



Positioned outwards, his trumpet plays a syncopated range of muffled sounds barely returned by an indifferent city. Tall buildings stare back blankly. Below him, a vertiginous drop reveals a gap where construction works are taking place. The building we are standing on — an abandoned office complex and shopping centre — is slated for imminent demolition.



From the terraced roof a door leads back inside to a dramatic space, seized by the Belgian composer Billy Bultheel for his performance Signs of Invasion (2018). Bultheel is a Berlin-based composer and performance artist known for both his extensive collaborative work with critically-acclaimed performance artists and a burgeoning solo career. His work is embedded in the vivid art scene of Berlin where the distinction between traditional artforms dissolves, and new media are being explored. Bultheel sees this as an opportunity to bring music and performance together, outside their traditional confinements.

Signs of Invasion is a work in four acts written for tuba, trumpet and percussion and scored to an electronic soundscape by Billy Bultheel. Three performers are carefully choreographed to move around a large, abandoned, open plan office that's built around a central atrium on three ascending levels and connected



played live by performers choreographed to abandoned, open built around a three ascending by stairways.

Busted aluminium blinds hang uniformly from its windows and cheap carpeting covers its floors.

The hierarchical ordering of these different levels is arranged in such a way that each level is more or less visible to the other, suggesting that working in an open plan office is akin to a different kind of performance: one where everyone is a potential target of surveillance. As the music bleeds into the space, an inner narrative comes to life.

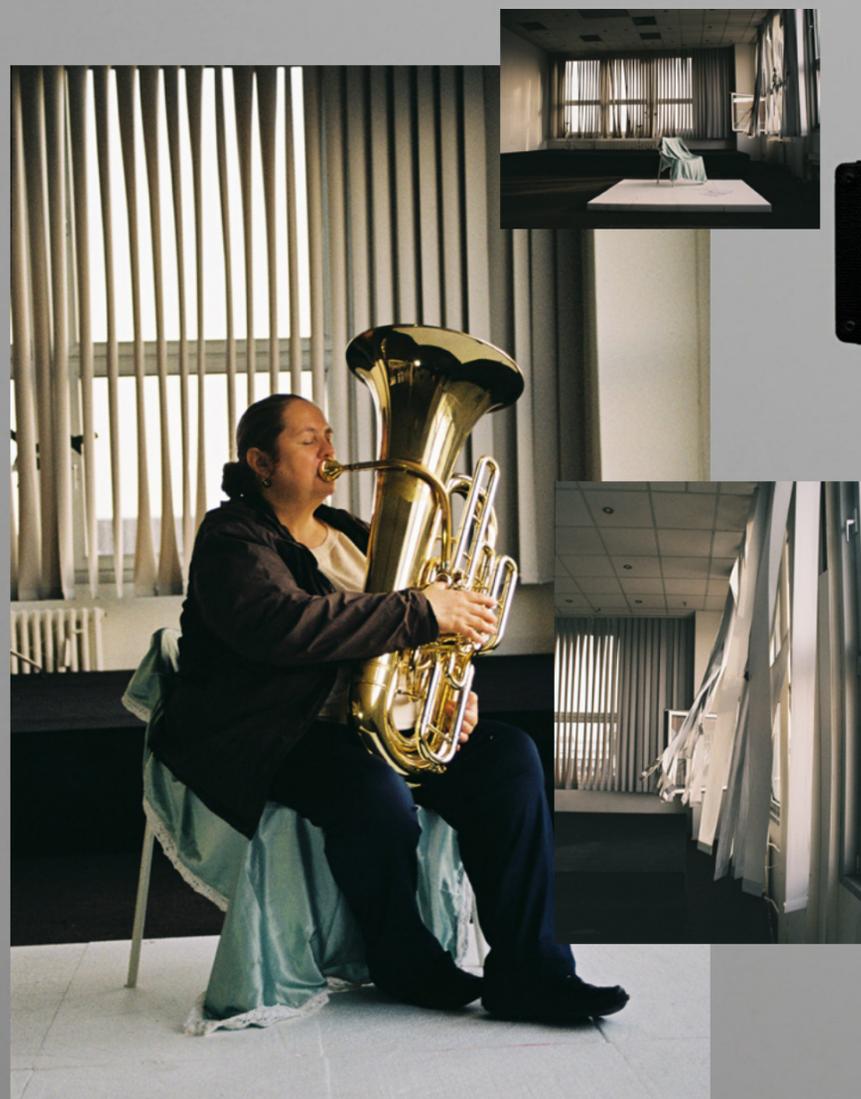
This is not music written solely for instruments, instead it's made to map the space itself, as though Bultheel were literally 'playing the building.'

While the brass-players roam the concatenated balconies, looking poignantly out of broken office windows, they play something close to a sad lullaby. The cathartic nature of the music envelops the audience. There is a shift in mood as electronic music breaks over the sound system, delivering something

more ominous. My ears sharpen like knives and I track the performers from high up, eager to decipher every move.

As a composer mainly occupied with electronic music, Bultheel's wide-ranging musical practice is strongly informed by how late Medieval and early Baroque composers — like Monteverdi, Bach and Thomas Tallis — composed in new and innovative ways. They composed for multiple voices, sometimes as many as 40, with each singer assigned their own melody that coalesces and creates a breathtaking soundscape called polyphony. Bultheel compares this to algorithmic composition practices of electronic music composers and explains how adding voices can be seen as a proto-synthesizer that creates 3-dimensional sound objects. He relates this set up to the conflation of music, architecture and technology.

"The architecture is so integral to their compo-



"I don't have an orchestra, but I have an armada of speakers on feet."



sitions," Bultheel declares. "The experience of polyphonic music was immediately immersive, like a 3-dimensional landscape in which the listener submerges. Claudio Monteverdi experimented with the positioning of singers in Venice's Saint Mark's Cathedral on connecting balconies high above the audience, their voices tracing the architecture of the space and cascading through the arches of the Cathedral's grandiose gold dome.

I like to see my loudspeakers as singers, and place them in choir formations across the spaces I compose for. It's not about creating a perfect stereo image, but its using space as an instrument itself, and at the same time making the loudspeakers characters in that landscape, embedding them in the performance as agents."

Combining polyphony and noise is a returning compositional strategy in Bultheel's work. Not only as a way to synthesise sound and create space, but also as a dramaturgical force to pit voice against voice and message against message. Whether it's a subtle two-speaker piece like *Mass for the Armed Man* (2018) — a two-voice mass on a Medieval protest chant, presented at Blake and Vargas Gallery — or work created for much larger institutional settings like the Witte de Witte Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam.

Bultheel was commissioned to create a work for an exhibition curated by artist and composer Ari Benjamin Meyers, titled *My Fields My Fields* (2018), after a song by the Red Army Choir (the official choir of the Russian armed forces). In *My Fields My Fields* four large speakers move around the austere gallery space carried by musicians who have downed their traditional instruments and instead engage as performers in a dance for speakers and distorted noise.

In 2009 Bultheel moved from Brussels to Germany to work with the choreographer William Forsythe at The Forsythe Company in Frankfurt am Main. It was here that he became acquainted with German visual artist, choreographer, performance artist and kindred spirit, Anne Imhof, then still a student at the Städelschule.

"I moved to Germany to start working in performance. Performance art was an appealing field for me, I felt it gave music a different space to exist and a different way to be listened to. Since I used space so much in my practice, my music became very choreographic. At the same time I got tired of working alone, and the collaborative aspect of performance and dance really appealed to me."

Imhof has become one of Bultheel's most extensive collaborators. Having initially asked Bultheel to participate in her graduation piece, *School of the Seven Bells* (2013), they soon found their collaborative relationship expanding quickly to music. Imhof herself has a background in noise music and punk and the pair bonded over a shared appreciation for distorted noise and in-your-face electronics.

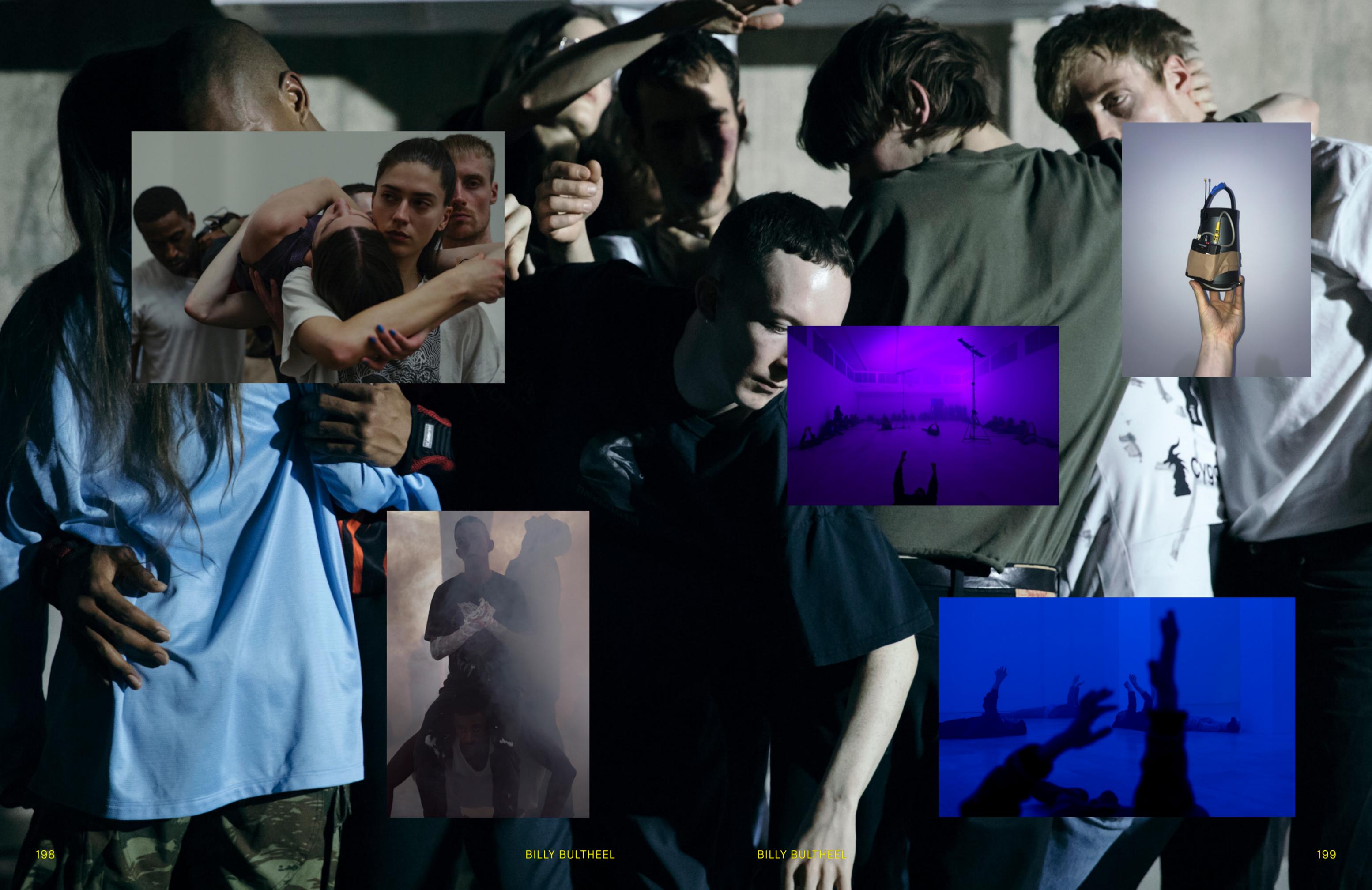
"My music was quite experimental and harsh, I always felt that people would get annoyed when I made them to listen to it," Bultheel laments. "But Anne was the first in Frankfurt to really appreciate it. She said she felt 'her heart getting ripped from her chest' [laughs]. The next show we did, she played my music after her performance as a kind of encore."

Since that first meeting in 2012, next to performing in her meticulous, yet abrasive, choreographies, Bultheel would take an important role in developing the musical score and sound installations for Imhof's performances, as both composer and sound artist. The works that Imhof has created since 2016, *Angst*, *Faust* and most recently *Sex* (performed as part of the BMW Tate Live Exhibition series in the Tate Modern Tanks), are accompanied by an extensive music score, some carrying the subtitle of opera.

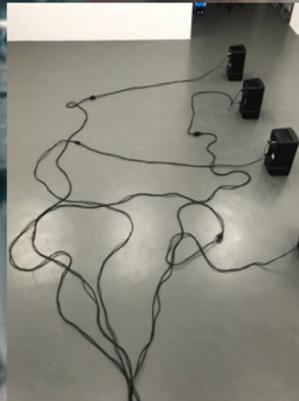
In his collaborations with Imhof, Bultheel's exploration of polyphony and physical space is just as exhaustive, if not more. Performance spaces like the Tate Tanks or Hamburger Bahnhof Berlin — intimidating in their size — installed speaker systems that allow the rooms to be 'activated' in a modular manner. By combining subwoofers with bluetooth players, iPhones and concert speakers, the performance space is 'played' like a sonic field. Some of the speakers are mobile and carried around by the dancers themselves, aligning the music with the choreography. Small microphones attached to the performers bodies amplify their actions at the other side of the space, inverting the space and creating a polyphony of sonic gestures.

"By using more local sound sources like iPhones or bluetooth players we could switch the music from the large sound system to very close proximity, allowing Anne to switch between large group scenes and very intimate quiet moments," Bultheel elaborates. "It's like having a modular orchestra — but I don't actually have an orchestra, I have an armada of speakers on feet."

The music to accompany these performances is just as abrasive and violent as the choreography, taking inspiration from black metal, industrial, and grunge,



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and placing them next to clear references to medieval and baroque music. Some of the compositions reference classical forms of orchestration but overlay them with vocals that are rooted in subcultural traditions, as an act to overwrite these classical forms with subculture, in attempt to overpower them. Baroque instruments like harpsichord are combined with electric guitar, or string ensembles with industrial drums to create dark metal waltzes and eerie arias.

Rising from this machine-like soundscape, and in sharp contrast, dark mournful ballads are sung live by the deep emotionless voices of Eliza Douglas, Franziska Aigner or Nomi Ruiz. The music brings an emotional depth that otherwise is strictly forbidden to Imhof's performers.

Bultheel explains that songwriting stands as a central and communal practice in these pieces, one that happens in collaboration with the singers and with collaborators like Imhof. Especially in *SEX*, a four hour long piece performed in the Tate Tanks in March 2019, accompanied by something close to a Schubertian song-cycle and a dance suite for moshpits. Here, Bultheel's musical collaboration with the painter, musician and performer Eliza Douglas stood central.

“Sitting around the piano and having these songs appear, it's like getting a glimpse of the performance for the first time, like peaking into its emotional sublayer. Composing these scores often feels like orchestrating an emotional breakdown, a roadmap to an internal landscape.” muses Bultheel.

The soundtrack for *Faust* — Imhofs' award-winning performance at the Venice Biennial in 2017 — is about to be released on seminal Berlin record label PAN, known for its interdisciplinary approach to the fields of contemporary art and music.

“The album of *Faust* is closer to an opera album than to a pop album,” says Bultheel about the translation from performance to album. “It has a musical dramaturgy with an overture, interlude, operatic arias, large dance sections, songs — every number is suggestive to a moment in the performance. There's a narrative to it which brings back the isolation, frustration, violence and anger which *Faust* brought to bare. I hope the album can become a testament to what the performance meant for so many people.”

Some of these concerns also play out in Bultheel's collaborations with choreographer Michele Rizzo.

In *Deposition* (2018) — in which music stretches over a longer arch of an hour — and *Prospect EVA* (2019), music and performance take on a more sculptural form. Bultheel says that for *Deposition* he created a composition which swerves over a deconstructed soundscape until it finally reveals a distinct techno beat. Again his compositional strategies imply a manner of moving, of discovering, of dancing.

“In the beginning, music from an organ becomes a soundscape and surrounds the dancer,” says Bultheel. “Slowly a techno beat, that's sliced into different layers, reveals itself. At first you don't know its techno. The effect is an internal process and because Michele is standing still in the space, the music is from his perspective. The melody doesn't come to him. It's how reality reaches you, like when you are resurfacing from water. It's really about someone having an internal moment.”

Experiencing an unmediated dose of reality has become a rarity in a world dominated by high speed communication and perpetual smartphone entertainment. The physical, experiential act of going to a club, gallery or concert venue, is not so much a vain attempt to escape the world but has instead become the exact opposite: an opportunity to be with real people, in a real space, listening to music, that not only transforms, but also affirms the reality of that space.

Hints to liturgical music and noise in Bultheel's work recall spaces of connection that we collectively long for this rapidly changing and often alienating world. His music subverts the geography and language of our everyday life, and unexpectedly we find ourselves collectively in the industrial halls of worship, embedded in a sonic mass.

Back on the top of the derelict Berlin office block, as Bultheel's music breaks into the crowd and voices trace the architecture of our gathering, a feeling is shared — a refuge from the tyranny of everyday life. A lonely trumpet echoes from a concrete rooftop, the city doesn't respond. Behind the trumpeter a group of people gather.

Bultheel is currently touring with Anne Imhof's *Sex*, Michele Rizzo's *Deposition* and a new work, *Hunting Machine*. The album featuring music from *Faust* is due for release on Berlin-based label PAN in Summer 2019.

www.billybultheel.pro