MARKO BATISTA: PAINTING WITH SOUND

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The first projects that used computers and electronics for their artistic expression and that I encountered in the gallery environment were musical projects, in which artists, in the manner of the early 1990s, explored the possibilities that arose when electronic instruments and laptops became generally available and more reasonably priced. It is not a coincidence that their early explorations of sound and electronic musical potentials first appeared in gallery spaces and not in concert halls, for traditional audiences were replaced by visitors who followed sound explorations up close, in a participatory and sometimes even interactive manner. It is also obvious that gallery audiences, accustomed to visual attractions and interactions between performers and audiences, possessed the most suitable sensibility for new explorations. The mixing of presentational techniques, in which artists put video and audio on a par, also implies unusual, hybrid dramaturgical elements, which establish artistic events as total artworks, which we perceive with all our senses. Thus, sound and sonic experiences are no longer described solely with the terms that are typical of musical art (e.g. melody, rhythm, musical form, harmony, tonality...); rather, they are described with the terms that also derive from visual and performative arts (e.g. texture, stroke, soundscape, respondence, interactivity...). As a result, artists who come from fine and performative arts and who use their visual intelligence to interpret sound material – in a way that is specifically different from that of the artists whose background is music – entered the field of music and exploration.

The legitimacy of using the material of visual arts as the raw stuff for designing sound derives from the modernist musical practice, which lessened the limitations of the traditional musical notations by introducing drawn and painted scores; in so doing, it encouraged the performers to interpret the more
or less linear musical notations. To understand this music, which demanded from its audiences/visitors a completely different sensory experience; one needed a combination of visual and musical intelligence. With the emergence of concrete music (musique concrete) in the 1950s, the presence of specially designed instruments, machines and spatial installations led the audiences into the world of sound (and into an awareness of its absence) that has not been experienced before. The modernist aesthetic experience and the structuralist and poststructuralist aesthetic paradigm extended the field of sonority into the sensitivity of sonic, optical and haptic experiences, which radically marked the development of music, musical industry and musical entertainment industry as we know them today.

The physicality of far-too-loud sound, which we experienced in the eighties at the so-called alternative music and hardcore concerts, was regenerated in the nineties in the physicality of digital noise hardcore, most genuinely introduced in Ljubljana by Atari Teenage Riot and Shizuo. The Slovenian version of noise hardcore appeared in the nineties with the multidisciplinary group of ten artists KLON:ART:RESISTANCE, which doubled its massive sound images with visualisations. As regards the genre, the latter derived from the MTV media logic, whereas regarding the content, they subverted the slimmness of the likeable televiual aesthetics of sound videos with difficult scenes and aggressively invasive editing, video noise and large-format projections. The cyberpunk aesthetics and geeky engagement usually drowned the artistic effect, however, in so doing, they pointed out the need for generational differentiation and a space for artistic activity whose politics problematises the middle-class understanding of art and the social role of aesthetics in general.

Several years after the klonart era and after having successfully completed his Master’s degree in fine arts at Central Saint Martins in London (2007), Batista returns to explorations of sound, which are usually closely related to design and manufacture of new, as yet non-existent instruments. His explorations of sound from the project Res://:Data (2005) onwards establish a hardware
environment, which has the status of a thesis that needs to be verified.\(^1\)

The established hardware environment makes it possible, time and again, to explore anew the sound possibilities, which are thus dependent on the space in which the environment is established as well as on the authors who use the system and the audiences who witness the event. These “instruments” make possible open sound compositions, whose display enables an insight into the phenomenology of sonority that we hear, the material/equipment that produces it, and the source of the signal that the instrument produces or captures from a thematised source. Because of the display of the production of sensory experience, all elements that the author has integrated into the system are meaningful and they need to be appreciated in all their symbolic

\(^1\) The formation of the thesis stems from various technological solutions, ideological obstructions in applied technique, cultural phenomena and various user experiences, which the author problematises in his work.
and imaginary dimensions. Namely, it is not irrelevant, for instance, whether the captured TV signal has been prepared in advance or it was captured “live”, or whether it was captured within the analogical range or within the digital one.²

Let’s consider the case of the audiovisual (AV) performance Error Trash (2008). In this sound exploration, Batista captures the digital televisual signal, which otherwise travels through various tele-communicational connections, in a wireless mode and then again through a series of cable networks, immediately before it is “caught” in the decoder, which decodes the signal and thus prepares it for presentation on the TV screen. The video signal that has not been ordered by the decoder³ is fragmented into packages that travel through the network; if we screen this signal without the decoder, we see a heavily distorted image, which jumps and flickers, gets scrambled and clears up again, yet, it still allows an impression about the image that should appear clear on screen. This contrast between the expected video image and the crude, scrambled image point to a significant locus, that is, to the device (the decoder) that decodes and mediates the signal. This device is obviously crucial for manipulating the video signal; it is so powerful that it transforms hardly intelligible or missing video information into a precise image that the sender wants to broadcast. It is perfectly clear that the possibilities for manipulating the content are limitless for those senders that might be interested in this.

In the project Error Trash, deconstruction of the televisual protocol is doubled in the sound image, which is interested precisely in the disorganized and false signals, unusual cadences and peaks, which are not manipulated by the author, but rather by the reality of lacking tele-mediated signals. Nevertheless, the causal connection of the scrambled image and the acoustics of errors generate

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² On the one hand, knowing these facts is significant because of the user experience and the culture of adapters, in which we live today, for the majority of high technology is distributed through multinational corporate agents; on the other hand, the artists themselves differ from one another in terms of the primary material that they use and in terms of the mode in which they use technology, so that some knowledge about the basics of highly mediatised culture is almost obligatory to understand their artistic work.

³ Batista captures the signal before the video decoder, that is, he is not using the latter at all in the performance.
an audiovisual experience that can be – less explicitly – encountered anywhere where tele-communicational media are used. This is the origin of the so-called glitch aesthetics, in which breakdowns, errors and deficient manifestation of signals are already integrated into the user experience and the awareness of the management of the tele-communicational network becomes is triggered every time when the image or sound start flickering.

In projects under the joint title *Temporary objects and hybrid ambients 2008–2010* (*Začasni objekti in hibridni prostori 2008–2010*), Batista himself constructs electro-mechanical interfaces, that is, instruments with which he captures signals and/or sounds. In the project *Hybrid sound-mechanical machines* (*Hibridne zvočno-mehanične mašine*), the source of impulses are neon lights, which pulsate in random intervals with characteristically irritating flashes. The utterly unpredictable triggering of signals is captured by the MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) signal converter, which transforms electrical impulses into precisely determined electronic ones and thus triggers in the computer the synthesis of various sound modules and, at the same time, modulates the minimalist mesh in the video projection, which helps us understand what is happening in the analogico-digital bowels of the instrument. In this interesting audiovisual event, Batista combines the highly aestheticised appearance of audiovisual techno minimalism and the depressing and irritating light cliché of corruptly flashing neon lights, which is used in the cinematic vocabulary, for instance, as the matrix for representing an utterly degraded, dilapidated or underground milieu. In this performance, we thus witness a schizophrenic contact of two realities, which co-exist in the contemporary urban environment, yet, always in a conflicting and polarised manner.

Batista thematises the gradual civilisational disappearance of analogical adapters in another couple of audiovisual events, in which he establishes electro-mechanical adapters, where an instrument-event emerges precisely at the conjunction of the analogical and the digital, like in the project *Error Trash*, in which the impulses were captured without an analogico-digital (AD) converter. While in the latter project the AD converter was present by
Marko Batista
Chem-Sys:Reaktor
Aksioma | Project Space, Ljubljana. 2012
being absent from the production of sound and image, the projects *Magnetic Matrix 3.1* and *H220* focus precisely on the formalised contact between the analogical and the digital. This contact is enabled by the author’s interference, which intervenes into an idle and apparently harmonious environment as an intrusive, erroneous intervention. *Magnetic Matrix 3.1* consists of an image-like pool filled with ferrofluid that is sensitive to the magnets that are moved along the back wall of the pool by the authors. The graphic effects produced by the clouds of ferrofluid are registered by the eye of the camera, which is connected to the computer programme for tracing movements, which generates digitally synthesised sound in the computer. Throughout the sound event, the authors, who manipulate the remarkably imprecise adapter, strive for the establishment of a causal triggering of sounds and thus produce dramaturgical tension, which hovers between live image and sound. In contrast to Roman Kirchner’s project *Maelstrom*, in which an identical construction is used merely to produce graphic effects generated by the pre-programmed magnets in the hidden background of the mechanical image, Batista in collaboration with Nataša Muševič uses the construction as a dynamic adapter, which makes it possible for the users and the spectators to grasp the laws of the electronic devices’ fuzzy logic and thus to detect the machines’ artificial liveness and imaginary metaphysics.

The contrast between a general idea about the precision and infallibility of electronics, the binary code and its quantifiable results as well as its errors, waste, lack, clouds, etc. is also the theme of the project *H220*, in which the adapter consists of a perfectly stable network of resistances and diodes, which the author, by touching them, forces into interferences and, consequently, into the production of sound and video image, which thus loses its technical sterility and is revived in the sphere of the actor’s and the visitor’s interpretations. The spatial set up of the loudspeakers forces the visitors into a spatial experience, in which the sound information is never whole in any of the possible positions in space; rather, it is always partial, audible only to the closest listener and inaudible to the listener on the other side of the space. Thus the listener or the visitor of this audiovisual ambient, which is spread throughout the entire gallery space, becomes a completely autonomous
Marko Batista and Boštjan Čadž
Timing Diagrams
Festival Lumina, Cascais, 2014
interpreter of the artistic event. The artwork is exhibited and particularised to the extent that it become impossible to talk about it as a whole, as a musical piece or a video work, not even as a concert. In H220, what we are dealing with is closest to an invitation to an audiovisual exploration, in which no final result is anticipated, only a participatory process of discovering sound material, understanding space and the choreography of the performer(s) and the visitor(s), who move physically through the audiovisual space/scape.

In his more recent installations, the author radicalises the relationship to sound by composing it and determining its position in space. In doing so, he shifts the focus from electronic and electrochemical processes to sound as object. In the CHEM:SYS:REACTOR project, the orientation of the tubes and the loudspeakers, from which sound vibrations emanate, is such that sound acquires a precise disposition in space and it assumes a precisely determined relation to space. Thus, each set up in a different room is different from the preceding one, for with the turning of the tubes, that is, with the directing of sound, the sound formation and the sound experience in space are organised. Thereby, the visitor is no longer focused only on the source of sound, on the pulsating instrument, but rather on the sound information in space, which can be comprehended by moving around through space. In this case, space is not just anonymous volume; rather, with its architectonics, it has become a part of an eclectic instrument. In the Optolyth project, the materiality of the sound source is withdrawn to the second plan and the relationship to sound is brought nearly to the level of audiophile obsession, for the chassis of the loudspeakers are designed in such a way that their trumpet-like form traces the ideal emanation of sound vibrations. Considering that the source of sound are entropic high-voltage generators and the sound that we are listening to is far from harmonious canons, the fetishisation of sound – as the material that Batista uses for his creativity – is all the more present.

At this point, we might venture upon a comprehensive reflection on his creativity in the past five or six years, that is, since Batista has started planning situations in which he treats sound as phenomenon and material. We are thinking, above all, about his spatial sound installations rather than
about his audiovisual performances and concerts, which are usually derived from larger spatial realisations. In a way, the retrospective of his projects at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Koroška (KGLU), too, refers to the possibility of a panoramic look at the presented series of projects, which are not linked directly and which have not been laid out as if the original installations were transferred from other gallery spaces, nor are they presented in a chronological order. Regardless of the fact that the exhibition does not present his entire opus or a meaningful summary of some sort, we can still follow with quite some precision the thread that has developed through the described projects.

A significant thread traverses four registers of exploring sonority, in which the author was first interested in the material properties of electronic and electric components (*Error Trash*); next, the supplying of chemical processes and electromagnetic components with loudspeakers (*Magnetic Matrix 3.1, Hybrid Audio-Mechanical Machines* and *Bentronix*) shifted the focus to chemical processuality, in which we are confronted with the difference between the temporality of chemical effects and the temporality of sound triggered by these mechanical processes. In the third register, the focus of the sound event shifts from the instrument or the source of sound to the soundscape, in which the visitor is immersed in the acoustic mass, which fills the space amorphously (*H220* and, partly, *Optolyth*), while in the fourth register, the precisely determined dispositions of sound organise the space and guide it into an integral spatial work of art, in which all these elements, which the author has been exploring in his projects, construct (*CHEM:SYS:REACTOR*) artistic experience, which does not rely on the author’s virtuosity but rather on his in-depth understanding of the materiality of sound and the psychophysical effects of acoustic perception.
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