

Sonic Genealogies

Peter Kutin on Christina Kudisch

Hi there, I am Peter Kutin. I am a Vienna-based artist, I work with sound as my main material and if you know my work you can probably find influences of noise music and sound art in general or experimental film and conceptual art. I'm generally very interested in the psychology of listening as well as auditory illusions and psychoacoustic effects and this might be the reason why I find myself often collaborating with other artists from different fields which could be a contemporary dance piece or more avant-garde film and audio visual piece or installations. I got invited here to talk to you about Christina Kubisch, the German composer and one of the well-known names in the field of sound Arts I would say. In the last maybe six years Christina and I did several collaborations to get her so I hope that I can give you some information and tell you some details about Christina Kubisch' work that you cannot find in Wikipedia or somewhere else in the net.

I met Christina for the first time personally in 2011 or maybe in early 2012. At the time I'd just finished a project called "Decomposition", therefore I recorded micro-structures of sonic gestures that the human ear cannot decipher, that lay beyond the boundary that is set by our limited senses. I believe a thing that Christina and I have in common is the interest to listen and look at other layers of this world that surrounds us by using extensions for our senses, and these extensions are often based on means of Technology. Christina later on invited me to give a talk about this project at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin and the theme of this panel or presentation or discussion later on was "Schwindel der Wirklichkeit", which could be translated as "Reality is cheating on you". We would meet later on a few times whenever we both happened to be in Berlin, so I went to her studio which is in the upper level of her house. This is the place where she composes or works in concepts, writes pieces and gets her work done and I remember that once when we were sitting in her living room and we were just

Share

Realization: Arnau Horta

License: Produces ©
Museo Nacional Centro
de Arte Reina Sofía (with
musical content licensed
by SGAE)

talkin about what's going on

basically we somehow pretty suddenly came up with the idea to do a collaboration which should be an audio-visual work as an experimental film that should be based only on sound and images of alternating currents that could be found alongside the Las Vegas Strip, the famous street that cuts through the desert of Nevada, the place where the American dream ends according to Hunter S. Thompson. And I think not much more that a year later we really found ourselves with a small team spending two weeks in Las Vegas, going out every night to record all sorts of light sources that the architecture of the city would offer to us And it was there when I really got to know and understood how Christina Kubisch works and how masterfully she handles her tools, and how much knowledge and experience she has gained all over the years doing this. It was pretty impressive for me to to see how she can read a city in terms of this hidden layer of reality. She knows pretty soon where the most interesting sounding electromagnetic fields can be found...

In the early 2000s Christina Kubisch created a piece called "Electrical walks". In his name you can already find the reference to a sound-walk, a name or a concept that was I think created by the Canadian soundscape scene alongside of composers like Murray Schafer. But she transported this idea or concept into a completely different territory because she went to enter the electromagnetic fields that would be around us in our urban spaces. So these electrical walks could be considered as a coordinated sound-walk that will lead you through different areas and places where you could hear a wide variety of a city's electromagnetic emissions. I think by now Christina has realized more than 60 or even 70 of these electrical walks in different places all over our planet. This could actually be considered a simple concept but if you look deeper into it it's getting very complex because it touches so many different areas and fields, not only in terms of artistry but also in terms of our society in general. This is just beside the fact that these electrical-walks sound really fascinating and they are of a tremendous sound quality and richness. One of Christina's main recording tools basically looks like a pair of headphones; it's also the device she hands out to the audience when she's doing her electromagnetic walks. These headphones would cover both of of your ears so they're more of the size like a pilot of a helicopter would wear. But Christina did some very clever manipulations on them. So she puts electrical coils inside each side of these headphones and then connect them to the loud speakers that are positioned right above your ears. Now, once these coils enter a magnetic field they will start to produce a current so they will produce voltage, and if voltage is sent to a loudspeaker, this loudspeaker will move according to or rather in a certain proportion to this voltage, meaning that it will create a sound. So if you would try to get some cash at an ATM it would sound like this.... Or if you were standing in Hong Kong beside to new plasma screens that are positioned close to a security gate of the shop you are in, it could sound like this.... Or if you were standing in Vegas below an always changing LED panel it would sound like this.... So these are just a few examples of what kind of sounds you could record with these headphones. What I find interesting in the device itself is that Christina turned its former purpose upside down. Usually if you use headphones they are supposed to disconnect you from your surroundings. If you listen to Bach or any sort of music you don't want to hear the traffic or anything else that's happening around you, especially in times of noise cancellation systems. But Christina's headphones they open a door to the reality that you cannot see but it always surrounds you 24/7. It's a reality that constantly changes and grows.

What I also find worth mentioning about this electrical walks is how much Freedom Christina gives to the listeners. Every participant will hear his or her very unique composition because you can pretty much decide on your own how you want to interpret or how you want to listen to this electrical walk. It all depends on how fast you go or how close you go to the sound sources or how loud you want to hear them and for what duration and so on. If you think of the usual or traditional concert situation, this is just not the case. In concerts we always need to have a central stage with an artist to be present or to be a adored or sometimes even worse. Christina's electrical walks don't need any of these factors to work out perfectly. It's pretty much free of hierarchies. She has set up a clear conceptual frame and the range of tools that can be moved within the frame and she accepts what sounds will be heard or will appear. I think her work especially with electromagnetic induction feels a lot with this balance between accepting and composing actively. This is an idea that you could find much more in America than in Europe. American composers like Cage or Feldman for example aimed to shift the focus from the active action of composing more towards the freedom of accepting and therefore being able to discover. Cage did this in a more performative way and Feldman who used this idea much more within the musical system that he composed with. What Christina also has in common with his composers is that she doesn't have any need to push the sounds she lets them be as they are and they are powerful enough anyway. By realizing electrical works as well as with many other of her compositions installations or works for rooms, she invites the audience to experience or to discover or to dissolve into the sound of a world that is provided by electricity. Often when people first hear this sound of reality that they didn't know but maybe are familiar with because it's always around it leads to an opening of perception as Peter Ablinger describes it. It's the moment when something in your mind makes click.

I remember that Christina once told me that she has never touched a flute again once she finished studying it. She felt that the concept as well as the system of the classical Orchestra doesn't correspond with her character, that it is something she cannot truly connect with. She didn't feel okay with the hierarchy of the system, especially as a woman. Probably as a reaction to this she wrote a series of pieces in the mid or the late seventies which are called "Emergency solos". These are flute recitals where Kubisch played the flute with boxing gloves or a gas mask for example, and by doing so she created a metaphoric image that was a direct critique towards the traditional modes of musical performance, especially from the perspective of a woman. Women in classical context are still now facing huge troubles and a lack of equality. The famous Viennese Symphony Orchestra had its first female musician in 2001 and of course it was a harpist. So it is still fucked up today but I guess the perspectives you had in the 70s in these fields were even worse. Christina freed herself from this field and revolted in an artistic way which finally let her to her own path and she became one of the first artists connected to the newborn field of sound art. I remember that she sometimes tells me that she and her colleagues like Alvin Lucier, Phill Niblock, Terry Fox or Akio Suzuki and so on they all were sort of outcasts and had to fight for showing their art and fight for finding space where to perform. Sound art just wasn't an established art form by the time Christina started doing it. Just in the last years she got again more in contact with the orchestral world because she gets more and more asked to write music and pieces for small ensembles or for certain instruments. Just last summer she presented the new piece at the Darmstadt Ferienkurse for cello and electromagnetic induction which left

a huge impression on the audience. I totally admire the preciseness Christina works with but also the way how she can connect a room and the audience with this invisible element of electromagnetic induction which will mostly manifest itself in an object based on wires and she just recently told me that her "Emergency solos" I was talking before will nowadays be interpreted by a younger generation of female musicians. So the context Christina's pieces touch are pretty timeless I suppose.

I think many of Christina's works go really deep context wise or in terms of observing our society she has done so many recordings in various different cities and regions so besides realizing her art she had created quite an impressive archive for a documentation of these electromagnetic sounds. In some places or cities she could probably show you how the amount of electromagnetic waves or how does sound characteristics have changed over the years. The wireless technology has manifested itself in our urban environment with an exponential growth especially over the last decade. Before the twenty-first century there were almost no mobile phones around and there were way less wireless routers and 5G was still far away. Christina often talked to me about how to acoustic information has changed and transformed and that she always needs to adapt their recording devices in order to catch these new signals. The frequency ranges that lay beyond our human perception are precious for the industry it seems. Developers let information transfers happen while we could not hear or see or feel them. Don't get me wrong at this point Christina's is not claiming that technology is a bad thing, she's sort of a big fan of technology but she is aware of the situation. For her all these technological developments have turned out to be an endless and ever-increasing pool of different sonic signals. She knows where to go and how to capture the sounds that have the quality she's looking for, whether this is a pattern of high-pitched tunes or noisy structure, harmonic layer, techno like bass drum sound, more complex rhythmic patterns or a sine wave-like frequency with its harmonics. Yet it is still surprising to her as she discovers new sounds every time she goes out doing recordings. That was when I understood that Christina plays or interprets a city like an instrument, like people would play a modular synthesizer for example. The clever thing in Christina's case is that she doesn't need to buy any new modules to get more complex sounds because our society creates them anyway, It's the high-tech driven need for being more connected that lets Christina's repertoire grow constantly somehow. And she doesn't even need to pay for it.

I guess every musician who is really devoted to her or his instrument or instrumentation knows a bit of its history or some stories to tell about it. I believe for Christina, as I said before, her main instruments or material is probably electricity itself. She likes to go where electricity is produced like other people would go to concert Halls. I myself remember visiting quite a few power plants with her by now. So it seems also pretty natural that Nikola Tesla, besides other inventors and technicians of course, but he especially is in pretty important figure for her. And I remember that when she mentions his name she would often refer to him as a crazy guy. So if you know about Tesla's life story or have seen the images of him sitting in his laboratory while flashes of alternating current which burst just right above his head while he's reading the newspaper as if nothing had happened I think this definition sort of hits the nail on the spot. Tesla was this incredible genius with a sort of punk attitude, or maybe that's the wrong definition. He was sort of not willing to connect to how the economic system is running at all. I

mean lived he basically for getting his work on going and not for the monetary success. He was probably the anti-businessman, and primarily a visionary heading for his utopia, who would at the end die alone and completely broke even though he was one of the most important inventors early 20th century. So it's not a big surprise that Christina often refers to him, like just recently on a split LP that she did with Eleh, that's called "Tesla's Dream". In general Christina is pretty much aware of the fact that engineers can be very important for artists. The thing about the artist is that she or he can use the tools developed by engineers in a dysfunctional or wrong or manipulative way to maybe discover something beautiful or fascinating. Christina works with the same engineer for a really long time now I think it's more than maybe 25 years who helps her to realize her visions of sensors or instruments that would reach frequency ranges that lay far beyond our human auditory threshold.

What left a big impression on me when working with Christina and listening to her works or recordings is that all these sounds are out there as they are, they sound like that without any further tricks or sound design attitude anymore, they're not even the atuned. These sounds are raw material or "non-fictional music" as Jennie Gottschalk, the author of the book named "Experimental music since the 1970s" would define it. If you think of industrial music or techno music there is a very close relationship to the sounds. So at one point the question arose in me if I personally for example feel attracted to this sort of music because the sounds this music is built on were already familiar to me before, if maybe only on a subconscious level. Of course no one knows but it's maybe an idea I considered worth thinking about. I personally regard as a privilege to work with artists who have gained experience by doing her work over a long time continuously simply because he can still learn so much but not in a student / master relationship or any of that sort. It's just because experience is basically something that's like just in the air and if it's something that doesn't compare to telling and it's not something that you can learn somewhere. I guess you just have to continue doing your work as sincere and honest as possible. Christina Kubisch is probably one of the most experienced and most skilled people working in the field of sound art and even though her schedule is pretty tight she's never pushy or turns into a diva or gets stressed out and she's just this amazing force of energy who can keep going. While compiling this podcast I was thinking if she has something in common with Nikola Tesla it might be that she's also not much interested in the monetary success but rather in being focused in doing her art her work continuously. Still her eyes and ears are wide open enough to do cooperations with a younger generation of artists and I believe that Christina is a sort of character who would always look behind a thing before simply accepting it and the highly respect that.



Christina Kubisch. Sebastian Mayer

