

Sonic Genealogies

Steve Roden on Rolf Julius

Hello. My name is Steve Roden. I am an artist born in Los Angeles, and living now in Pasadena, California. My artistic practice includes painting, drawing, sound, performance, sculpture, film / video, and writing.

I met Rolf Julius the first time in Berlin in 1999. I was invited to perform for a small festival called "Sampling Rage", and it was the first time I met Rolf, and also Christina Kubisch, and several other sound artists at the time.

I remember my first meeting of Rolf. I had arrived from the airport and was taken directly to the venue, and as I was walking down a long corridor, I saw a man bent down looking at an open suitcase on the floor with a lot of small electronics. As I got closer, I could hear some small buzzing sounds and some kind of other low-volume electronics, but everything was quite quiet.

When I was upon the man and the suitcase, I could see that he was bent over, staring and listening to the sounds that were laid bare in that open suitcase. My initial thought was that the man's suitcase had fallen open, since there were wires and all kinds of speakers, a kind of a mess. I asked him if he needed any help, and he looked at me kind of stunned, with also a bit of a smile, for I think he knew that I had mistaken his installation for an accident.

When I think of Rolf using the term "small music" more as a philosophy than anything in terms of the sound of his works, I think he chose that term "small music" in opposition to all the large, noisy things, spectacles and such like that. Most artists I know are always looking for large gestures, something that will grab attention. But Rolf's works were always discreet and I love that that the works have to be discovered, his works tended to have a presence of humility. And for myself, well

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The intention of the Sonic Genealogies series is to listen to the work of some of the most eminent figures in experimental music and sound art in the 20th century. However, it seeks to do so in a unique way: through the ears and voices of those artists who have retaken certain aspects of its sound legacy and melded them in some way into their own creations. Consequently, the idea is to put into practice this beautiful idea of "sharing listening" which Peter Szendy puts forward in the pages of his book Listen: A History of our Ears.

maybe, something also outside of the term “small music” but the term I use for my own work was “lowercase”.

I didn't know that Cage used the term “small music”, but these terms are not really “fixed”, they're not genres of music, but more like philosophies. And I think myself and Julius have explored a landscape mostly of intimacy, using “poor materials” and, in many cases, using low fidelity.

I think you are right in the idea of silence as a kind of suspension. A pause per se where something seems not to be present, and then suddenly, the thing opens and everything changes. I'm sure this has happened with a lot of people the first time they heard cages 4'33”, expecting a joke or something that might be boring. But of course in 4'33” and many of Julius' installations, the listener has to “discover” the work or the music or the sound. It's beautiful in that way, when you are in a situation where initially you don't think you see or hear anything, and then you realize that you have been looking or listening without paying attention. And so it is up to the audience to complete the work and the experience. And of course, what we are really talking about is attention. And Julius' works, of course, need attention because they have to be discovered.

Here's of course when Julius says: “I'm interested in nothing”. It appeals to me a great deal. It's a cliché, perhaps, to call Julius' work like a zen koan. But more it's like a challenge, a challenge at your senses to see if you are hearing what you hear, if the sounds you are hearing are inside your head or coming from outside. You can't always place where it's coming from in terms of location in space.

Being interested in nothing is no better or worse than being interested in something. What is important is that these ideas don't shut the door; they offer a situation or an idea or a moment. And over time the responses begin to change, because you can't know the work in total. It's like an open conversation. It has no end, you can continue rolling it around in your ears or your mouth; how it tastes, how it feels, and every time different.

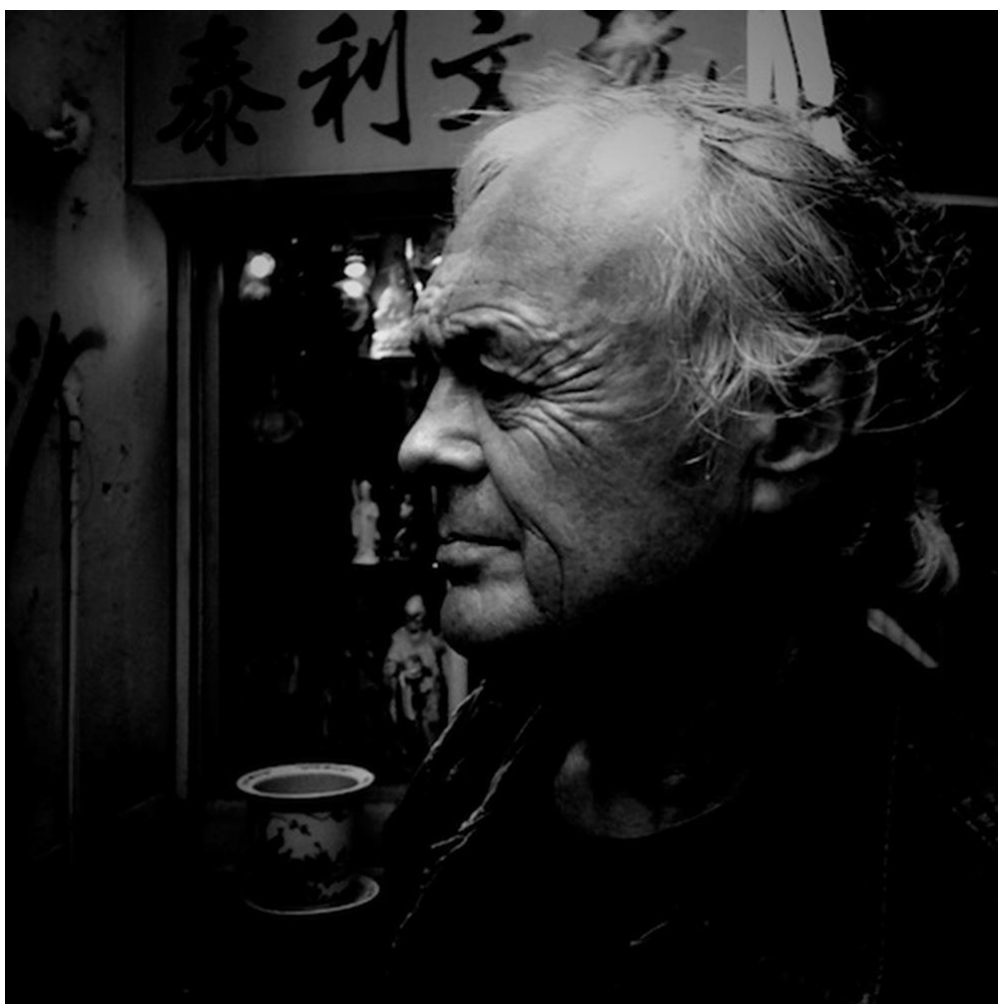
I would say that everything we've been talking about so far, this really resonates in terms of a shared aesthetic. Maybe because both Julius and I spent time in Japan, but also making works that aren't precious or about technique, and I think we both embrace mistakes and accidents, allowing them, sometimes even needing them, to be part of the process.

Many years ago, I was invited to Norway to make field recordings towards making a new work in various remote landscapes near Bergen. There were several of us and every day we would get dropped off in a remote location to make recordings. All of the other artists had very high-end recorders and microphones, like a traveling recording studio. But in my case, I knew that my way of recording would not capture the landscape as I heard it, as it was in real life. In fact I had no interest in replicating what I heard in life, so I chose to use micro-cassettes, contact microphones, pencils, paper, and a bunch of small acoustic things. In the evenings we all shared our recordings and everyone was consistently asking me how I was processing the sounds and the fact of how to do that was very simple I just happened to be using crappy materials, cheap recorders, and things that would simply sound different because the technology was so poor. Everything has a voice. And the electronics sound so much

like landscapes. I think both Julius and myself made works that exist without narrative, towards more sort of landscape or a space without a beginning or an end.

Julius' works were alive, they are still alive; with the use of pigments and buzzers, and teacups... These are not just things but a kind of alchemy in a way, using various materials, simple materials towards a greater whole.

In the early 1990's, everything was really about spectacle and I felt that there would be no place for a young artist to find inspiration in the culture of the loud. My discovery of Rolf's work, along with Terry Fox's work, opened my ears and my eyes to the culture of sound art, and as such I found Rolf's work in particular an antidote to the loudness of popular culture. For my own needs I needed something quieter. When I first saw that suitcase of Rolf's full with wires and buzzers on the floor, messy, humble, quiet, it pretty much changed my life; and certainly changed my work.



Rolf Julius. Edwin Lo