

SPECTRAL ANALYSIS

Interview with Justin Bennett
Arie Altena

'In 1635 a plague-house was built on what is now the WG Terrain in Amsterdam. There was a hospital on this site until 1983. Dr. Ernst Hartmann (1915–92) observed that some areas in a hospital were more conducive to healing than others. He determined that a grid of radiation covers the Earth's surface. At some points, these lines form a "Hartmann Knot" of negative energy. Hartmann's work has been related to the study of ley lines and *feng shui*, as well as to Wilhelm Reich's orgone energy'. This is the text for Justin Bennett's soundwalk *Spectral Analysis WG* (2013) a fiction in which he attempts to reveal energy phenomena in and around the WG Terrain while investigating properties of sound and electricity. This interview is an edited transcript of a public interview about *Spectral Analysis WG* that took place on 6 February 2013.

Arie Altena For *Sonic Acts* you made a new soundwalk, *Spectral Analysis WG*, which takes the same theme as *Spectral Analysis*, the soundwalk you made for the Kontraste Festival in the small Austrian city of Krems. How did you develop the idea for these soundwalks, which are concerned with electromagnetic phenomena and the science, the myths, and the crackpot theories around them?

Justin Bennett The history of electromagnetic experiments is something I have always been quite interested in. There is a weird connection between avant-garde arts that use new media and the occult, which sometimes comes out and is sometimes suppressed. There is for instance the influence of theosophy - which is based around the idea of seeing auras - on abstract painting. It's related to the way that artists look for what is beyond our visible reality. The history of early experiments with electricity and electromagnetism seems very much connected to esoteric theories. If you go back to the eighteenth century you find Franz Anton Mesmer, who was a key figure in my soundwalks for Krems and the WG Terrain in Amsterdam. In my narrative he visits the hospital at the WG site. There are so many crazy stories about Mesmer that it doesn't really matter if you invent a new one or not. The reality is even crazier than the fiction. Mesmer was convinced that there was a magnetic fluid, which somehow connected every living thing, even inanimate objects. He thought that if you drank a glass of water that had

been magnetised, it would affect you by working on the flows of magnetic fluid inside you. He was convinced that it worked because he really was able to cure people of all sorts of things, even blindness. The current view is that he didn't realise what he was doing. What he did was something between hypnotism, suggestion, and manipulating the unconscious - in itself an idea that did not exist in the eighteenth century. The theme of 'spectral analysis', which now comprises two soundwalks, and is developing further into other things, is about this other, spectral world. That other world could be the dark universe, invisible phenomena, ghosts. The idea is that you can use technology to tap into it and listen to it. That is exactly what early experiments with electricity were trying to do.

AA Your soundwalk focuses the attention of the audience very much on certain types of sound, for instance environmental sounds, through the fictional story that you tell. This happens because you lead the listener to certain spaces with specific acoustic qualities and you overlay it with recordings you made on exactly the same spot. Sometimes that leads to an almost spooky layering of sounds - especially when you're wearing headphones that don't shut you off entirely from the environment so you still hear the sounds of the street as well. And then there's the fictional story that focuses your mind in a certain direction... This is not really a question. I could ask, is this intentional...

JB And I will say: 'Yes'.

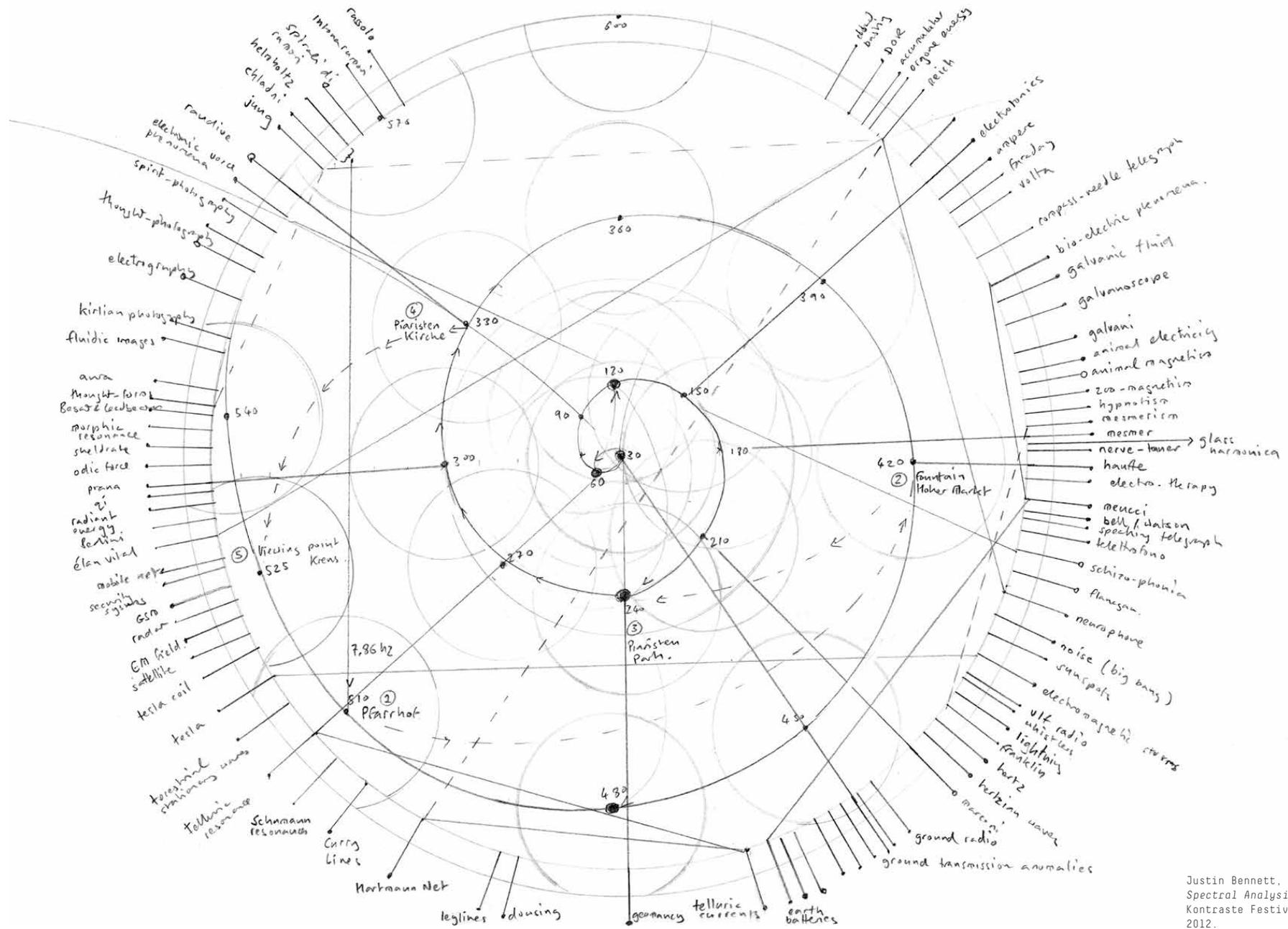
AA Do you get the idea for the story first, or do you begin with recordings?

JB It's a bit of both. If it's possible, like it was in Krems and Amsterdam, it involves a lot of hanging around in the space. The space itself is crucial, the feeling it gives you. I take something of the atmosphere,

or of the ambient of the place, maybe tweak it a little bit, to direct your attention to something, to make you feel it in a slightly different way. Generally the most important part of a soundwalk like this one is to define the route. The route determines the timing, it determines the structure, and to a certain extent it determines the story - certainly for *Spectral Analysis WG*. It also determines the whole visual aspect, because what you see during the walk is part of the experience. What you see is what you see there normally, but you see it in a particular order. Making a soundwalk is almost like making a film. You can direct people's attention; you can say, look at this, or look back to where you came from. You can actually suggest how they should view the environment. A soundwalk definitely focuses on hearing, certainly if you aren't used to listening intently to environmental sound, it can be an ear-opening experience - but it is also about looking. It makes you see the world in a different way.

AA One of the effects of a soundwalk is that it can make you aware of the fact that there are many forms of listening, that listening is multidimensional. It enriches the awareness of listening...

JB Listening is an issue that occupies many people who work with field recordings. What is sonic reality, how do you listen to it? What is your relation to the acoustic environment? This is a layer in my work as well, even in a piece as fictive and electronic as *Spectral Analysis*. When I'm walking around, I find myself switching between different ways of listening. There's a kind of navigational way of listening (you hear something, and follow that sound, for instance), there is listening for meaning (for instance, when you listen to language), there is listening to music. You normally listen to environmental sounds in a different way from how you listen to music. But



Justin Bennett, sketch for the soundwalk Spectral Analysis, 2012, commissioned for Kontraste Festival, Electric Shadows, Krems, 2012.

by changing the sounds, or putting them in another context, you can switch the mode of listening, and you start hearing environmental sounds as music. Many people have the experience after doing soundwalks – not just mine – that when they take the headphones off they start listening in such a sharp way, that they hear everything as music. I like playing around with the boundaries: when does a sound become musical, when does it become part of the story, or when does the story become an instruction, telling you where to go?

AA There is a marked narrative and fictional aspect to your recent soundwalks, whereas your earlier soundworks were closer to field recordings...

JB I do not really know why that is. It has partly to do with working with the form of the soundwalk, which gives you the opportunity to tell a story. I think of moving through the city as a form of drawing. It is like making traces, and recording is also like making traces. If you listen to a recording of somebody moving through a city, it's as if you are taking part in a journey. You are listening through their ears, you are following them. So also in my earlier sound work there was already a movement towards narrative. Now I indeed use the soundwalk as a way to tell stories. Soundwalks are a great form because you can do all sorts of things in them. You don't have to create narratives, there are soundwalks that work very powerfully just with sound, presented without any text at all. You get an instruction to walk in a direction, or be in a certain place and listen. This coupling of a spatial and visual environment to a presentation of sound has a very strong effect.

AA In *Spectral Analysis* for Krems the person participating in the soundwalk is also the actor. The story is in the second person. The listener is put in a position, instructed, for example, to

go stand near that fountain, put your hands on the iron bars. You are enacting the story by doing the soundwalk. In *Spectral Analysis WG* you listen to a third person story. It's about another person and there is more distance. Why did you decide to do that?

JB In Krems I was really interested in creating a narrative structure, but I also found it interesting to include the sound experiments that I recorded there in the soundwalk. You are listening to the sound experiments as if you are doing them yourselves. In the Krems version there was no spoken voice. The story was printed on a sheet of paper that you received at the start of the walk. In Amsterdam I first tried to do a similar thing. I wrote a story, telling you what to do. But I found it very difficult to find the right tone. The WG buildings were once a hospital and therefore I decided to use the perspective of a patient who is conducting his own electromagnetic experiments. You are listening to a recording of the doctor telling you what this patient did. It obviously happened in the past, but you are still listening to it as if it happens in real time – you are hearing the experiments they apparently did together. Reading a story for yourself and listening to a voice telling a story are very different situations. If you read it, it is almost as if you are reading it in your own voice. You are the person who is telling yourself these things. If you have a voice coming through the headphones, there really is somebody else present telling you the story. I was curious if it was possible to become immersed in a story despite this distance of a third-person perspective. How far can you push that, and still make it an immersive experience?

AA You just said that this material is leading you in new directions. I was wondering, have you ever made a radio play, as that's a form that is quite close to what you are doing now?

JB I have done some radio projects that were more conceptual. They were about space, or the city, where I was taking sounds from one place and broadcasting them somewhere else. At the moment I'm working on a radio version of the soundwalk *Telettrofono*, by Matthea Harvey and myself, which is about Antonio Meucci, the Italian inventor of the telephone. He invented instruments for the theatre and was also interested in electricity and specifically in electrotherapy. He inadvertently invented the telephone when he was trying to cure somebody through electrotherapy. He gave his patient, who was sitting in another room, an electric shock and that person cried out. Meucci heard that cry through the device he was using to give the person the electrical shock and realised that the voice was somehow transmitting through the wires. That led to the telephone. Just as with *Telettrofono*, some of the material of *Spectral Analysis* could work well as a radio play, but I would have to structure it differently, and you probably need more explanation, as you miss the visual and spatial experience. Actually when I started to work with sound, music and text, I did not really have a context for that form of composition. I began to think of it as a radio play, as *Hörspiel*. You could just think of a time slot, say twenty minutes, and imagine a piece for people listening through a loudspeaker. It was a way of thinking about working with sound. Like a soundwalk it's a form. It's a form I like.