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Interview with
Mark Fell
Arie Altena

Mark Fell is considered to be at the forefront of extreme and independent computer music. His projects range from minimal electronic music, to audiovisual and sound installations. He works with synthetic sound, light and experimental technologies and brings together interests in computational technologies, non-musical sound synthesis, oppositional aesthetics, and irregular encounters with time and space. In *Attack on Silence* (2008) for instance, he explores sacred geometries and sound as a tool for meditative practices, technologies of mind control, and neuro-aesthetics. The installation *Matter-Space-Motion* (2010) is about the movement of subatomic particles and sound; and in *it Hz* (2010) he uses high power white laser light and multichannel sound to produce a simultaneous sonification and visualisation of mathematical functions. His music compositions are mostly process-based, as can be heard on *Multistability* (raster noton, 2010), *u18* (editions mego, 2010), *Manitutshu** (editions mego, 2011), and *Periodic Orbits* of a Dynamic System Related to a Knot (editions mego, 2011). I interviewed Mark Fell by e-mail, and focused on his approach to time in music.

Arie Altena Most pieces on *Multistability* and *Manitutshu** come across as very rhythmic in the sense that they are made from short pulses. These pulses are not arranged in a metronomic way; the music is rather fractured and sometimes the order seems random or chaotic. This leads to a completely different sense of time than that created by, for instance, techno or classical music.

Mark Fell One of the things I wanted to try – initially with *Multistability* – was to focus on timing structures and make this the central feature of the work. Perhaps you could say it is very rhythmic as it doesn't contain much else, or that nothing else is as elaborate as the rhythmic feature of the work. You mention short pulses, but actually one of my main concerns with making *Multistability* was to explore the duration of sounds. For example, often a piece is little more than a variation of a sound's length relative to

the start of one sound and the onset of the next. I think my interest in duration, particularly the duration of chords, is derived from the organ stabs found in house music of the early 1990s. In *Multistability* I try to isolate and expand that characteristic. In terms of the arrangement of the sounds it's hard to quantify what might count as fractured, random or chaotic. Sometimes the order goes from longer to shorter sounds, sometimes from louder to quieter. For me it is quite organised. The rhythm according to which the order of sounds is played is definitely non-regular. Perhaps it could be argued that this invokes a different 'sense' of time, but I think music's temporal form can be compared to sculpture's spatial form. In sculpture various spatial structures of differing kinds still inhabit a common spatial universe. My music inhabits the same temporal domain as all other music – it's not outside time, or in a different time. The different sense of time comes about from the way different types of music modulate the temporal field – how they divide up time, how they deal with repetition, change and so on. For me it's almost a spatial experience, like moving around a very complex climbing frame, for example. Just as sculpture constructs an experience of spatial form, so music constructs an experience of temporal form.

AA While listening to *Multistability*, I was struck by the fact that at first there seems to be no flow to the music, yet after a while a strange breakbeat-kind-of-flow does start to emerge...

MF It's interesting that we can speak about 'flow' in music, just as we do with time. Some theorists have suggested that there is no such thing as the flow of time in nature. The sense of flow is a feature of our human experience of time. I'm trying to consider the place of music in this experience, how music is related to the experience of 'flow' of time. On another level, my concern as a music producer is to make music that, although it is rhythmically quite unusual, still has a kind of human trajectory. My music can be enjoyed in the same way that highly metronomical club music might be enjoyed. Recently I have become quite obsessed with Indian classical music and how the various instruments in this music

fit together in temporal configurations. After I did a performance in New York, an audience member told me that the timing structures in my music reminded him of Indian music.

AA Can you explain how you deal with time in your music, in both a musical and a technical sense?

MF Mostly I work with quite simple algorithmic processes to generate rhythmic structures. None of my music, or only an extremely small amount of it, is written in a timeline. In the vast majority of cases I build a system with three or four parameters that I can change to create rhythmic changes. These systems reject the notion of a bar that is of a more or less equal duration, and which is subdivided into notes related to one another by various ratios. In my recent music the duration of the bar is completely changeable, and the divisions of the bar cannot be thought of as halves, quarters and so on. I generally work with milliseconds, not beats per minute.

AA How does composing with computer processes influence timing and the sense of time in your music?

MF The most important way in which composing with software and computational processes changes my relation to the temporal (as a composer) is that it enables me to reject the timeline/score paradigm. For me a program that asks the user to place notes onto a grid (a timeline composed of bars) too closely follows a very outmoded understanding of time as a linear sequence of events. In fact I cannot work that way. I find it completely impossible to make interesting music using a timeline onto which I place notes.

AA What is exactly the problem with the timeline?

MF The problem is that the timeline is outside real time. The idea that you can stop and rewind time to change things and 'get it right' also means that the results sound totally dead – at least for me. The results are too directly determined by my personal tastes and habits. In this scheme the composer is placed outside the time of

the music and is unable to engage with the music in its own temporal field. Basically it separates the composer from the music. I dislike the metaphysical implications of this scheme and also the music I make within it.

AA I can imagine that some people would say that it's rather the use of algorithms in music composition that completely separates the composer from the music and that such a divide is only absent in live performances. For you composing with processes is actually a way of engaging with the music. How do you see this, and how important is performing live in this respect?

MF I take the position that no single way of making music is more direct than others. All music-making means engaging in some kind of process, whether it's singing in a group, playing a piano, composing a score on paper, or composing with algorithms. All these processes have different characteristics, conventions and parameters. Actually, 'process' is just another word for 'making' or 'doing'.

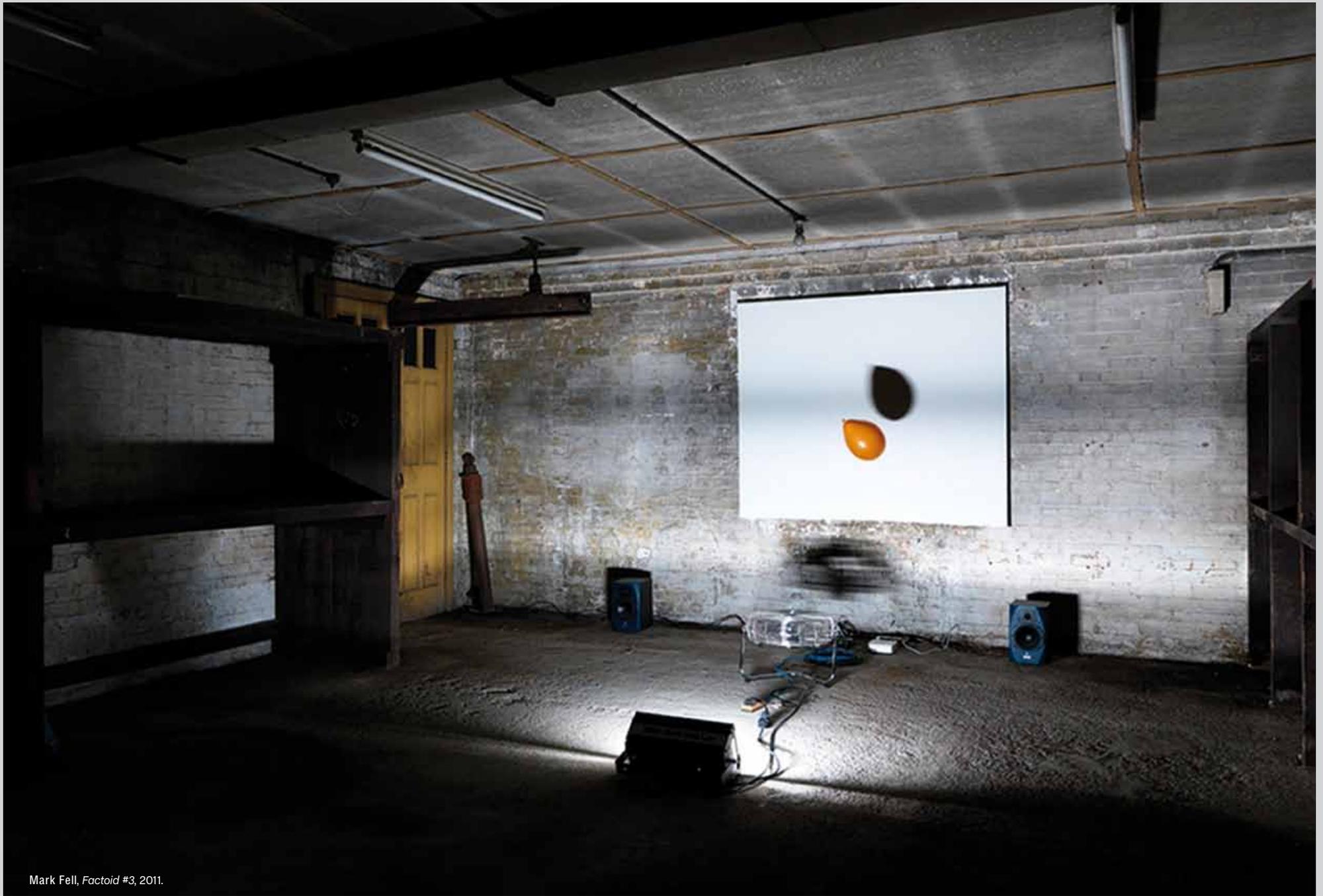
A few months ago I was talking about composing to a colleague. He asked me to describe the interaction between the machines I was using and myself while making a piece, but I couldn't do it. The interaction – if any – that takes place is between the machines and myself on the one hand, and the ideas, patterns and sounds on the other. The process is the arena where that interaction occurs; it constructs the possibility of that interaction. Making music in real time is important for me. By this I mean not stopping and starting, not working on patterns that are put onto a grid. Performing 'live' – in the sense of being in front of an audience while doing this – is not that important, although it's often very enjoyable. I don't see performing live in front of an audience as adding some additional, essential quality to the music.

For me performance in the studio is just as valid, if not more so. I described my last album as 'sort of live' or 'almost live' for this reason, because I wanted to take away the special privilege that live music is often believed to have.



Mark Fell, *64 Pixels and 240 Sine Waves* (detail), Big Bang exhibition Hong Kong, China, 2007.

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Mark Fell, *Factoid* #3, 2011.

^{AA} How do you know, or decide, if a piece is good or not?

^{MF} For me all aesthetic judgments are merely tribal behaviours. This is the case when making music and when assessing its merit. If we try to answer questions about 'why one likes this and not that', we get drawn into endless re-descriptions of the same basic premise. It's only when we stop trying to qualify our aesthetic prejudices by recourse to aesthetic explanations that we can say anything meaningful. In making music I aim to deliberately engage with those behaviours, prejudices and explanations. Basically, my position is, if you want to find out why you think something is beautiful, don't talk about beauty, but talk about the context within which that beauty is constructed. In this sense the more successful pieces are the ones that more effectively engage with those behaviours, prejudices and explanations, and which place an emphasis on the context in which those behaviours, prejudices and explanations occur.

^{AA} Could you give an example of the processes or algorithms you use in composing music?

^{MF} I use MaxMSP to generate pattern data, which controls synthesis algorithms that I have developed, and also commercially available plug-ins. The patterns are recorded into a sequencer as MIDI for editing and mixing. I like recording as MIDI for practical reasons. You don't end up with huge amounts of audio data. Most of the processes I build tend to derive from my earlier encounters with drum machines, sequencers and analogue synthesis – for example a combination of the Roland TR808 and the Roland SH101. Although this is the case I think that the patterns are quite different from those I might make if I used an actual TR808 and SH101. To give an example, I built a simple sequencer with which I could vary the duration of each step and how many times each step was repeated. I found it much more interesting when the durations were specified in milliseconds than as fractions or multiples of a bar.

^{AA} The introduction to an interview in *Factmag* states that you 'apply academic techniques to elements of rave culture'. Would you see that as an apt description of your work?

^{MF} I wasn't really into rave culture – but I was very interested in techno and house music from the period 1987 to 1992. It's probably true that most of the music I make refers to that period. The sounds I use in my music reference forms of techno and house music, though the patterns do not. I am very suspicious of academic music, but around the mid-1990s I became aware of the tools produced by academic institutions, and I wanted to use them. My hope was not to make techno and house music more intellectually credible; it was simply because I wanted to use a whole bunch of approaches and tools to make music I like to listen to. I find the division between academic and non-academic practices very problematic. Three things that worry me about academic approaches to music making are, firstly, that if you think about things in a theoretical way you get better music; secondly, that if you use more complicated technology you get better music; and thirdly, that academic music is truly experimental, as it is free of the constraints of popular styles, software and technologies. None of this is actually the case. For me the best music is made outside academic institutions. In fact academic institutions are struggling to keep up with independent producers.

^{AA} While listening to the podcasts on generative and process-based composition that you made with Joe Gilmore for Radio Web Macba in Barcelona, I sensed a similarity between some of the older process-based compositions and your recent work...

^{MF} Most of my music is derived from process-based composition, although I'm not aware of any works that directly relate to mine. My main influences are house and techno, industrial music and synth pop. I'm not really interested in early electronic music or experimental electronic music. I think the exception is Yasunao Tone's music, some of which could qualify as early electronic music.

^{AA} Sometimes it's almost as if you can 'feel' the algorithm while listening to your work – not in terms of guessing or being able to analyse which process or processes you use to generate the sounds, but rather in the sense of feeling close to the sounds. Is such a sense of tactility important for you?

^{MF} You can actually hear the process, as that is all there is. Maybe you cannot reverse-engineer the process, or give a logical description of what is happening, but that does not undermine the fact that you absolutely are hearing the algorithm. Hearing the algorithm, understanding it and explaining it are different modes of encountering the algorithm; none are superior to any of the others.

^{AA} What effect are you hoping to achieve with your light installations?

^{MF} I would like to feel immersed in an energy that is neither visual nor aural.

^{AA} What do you mean by 'multi-stability', the title of your 2010 raster-oton release?

^{MF} I was drawn to this term for lots of reasons. I don't really mean anything by it, but I like the way it refers to a rapid and ongoing switch in how we perceive the thing that is right in front of us. I also like the sense in which a thing has no fixed state. Finally, I like it as a kind of description of the way we, as human beings, shift between stability and instability as we go about our daily lives.

Slightly different versions of this interview have been published in *Neural*, issue 40, Autumn 2011, and in a Dutch translation in *Gonzo Circus*, # 107, January–February 2012.