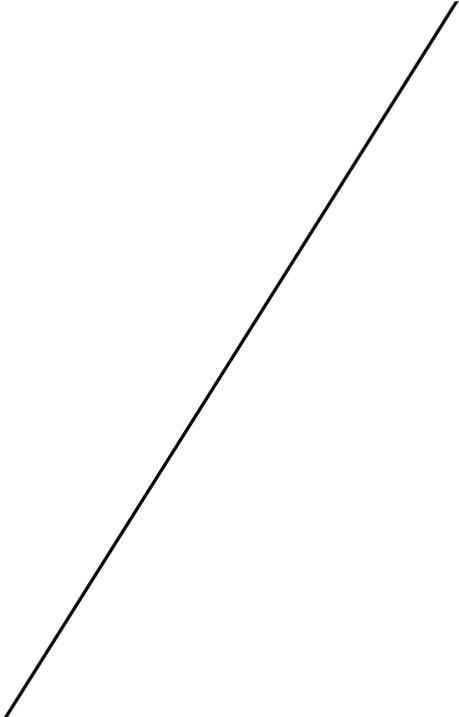




THE PROJECTOR IS MY FAVORITE SONIC OBJECT

Interview with Thomas Köner
ARIE ALTENA



Sonic Acts spoke to Thomas Köner on Thursday 5th July after he had performed *Quasar* with Jürgen Reble in Paradiso, Amsterdam. Reble projected his abstract 16mm films onto Paradiso's walls and roof, causing the light-beams from the projectors to refract on the smoke in the venue. Thomas Köner mixed and processed sounds from the body of the film-projector to a spatial soundtrack played over four loudspeakers. Earlier that week an exhibition opened at the Kabinetten of the Vleeshal in Middelburg featuring Köner's video-piece *Nuuk* alongside Jan-Peter Sonntag's 612.43 *WEISS* and Jürgen Reble's film *Yamanote Light Blast*. *Nuuk* consists of a series of 3,000 photos taken from a webcam in Nuuk, the capital of Greenland. Almost nothing happens – the images are mainly monochrome and almost nothing moves, but Köner's minimal approach creates an intense contemplative and immersive experience.

What struck me during the performance of *Quasar* was the beauty of the refraction of the light from the film-projectors on the smoke in the room. Maybe that was even more beautiful than the colorful, abstract patterns of Jürgen Reble's films projected on the walls and roof.

The point of *Quasar* is to take the images from the screen and into the venue. We need a lot of smoke for it, and this time it did not go exactly as we had wanted. The organisation was worried that the smoke would stay in the venue too long and they turned on the air-conditioning early. The smoke disappeared too quickly. For a piece like this you are only ever getting close to an ideal situation for its presentation.

All the image material in *Quasar* was created by Jürgen Reble, the sound is by you. What is your aim when making soundtracks for his movies?

I would not say that I have an aim with this piece. At least eighty percent of the sounds you hear are transformed projector sounds. I think that should be the original sound of the picture, as a signature. I do add electronic processing but I try to avoid anything like formal development. Therefore, it is a very static piece. As a musical composition it is only interesting in so far as there is sound at all. The quality of the piece lies in all the different textures of the sonic events taking place inside the projectors, all those sounds from the little motors. Therefore the piece has a research quality rather than a melodic or compositional quality.

What is that research quality?

The research concerns the body of the film-projection machine. There is no sonic object on earth that I have studied more deeply than the film-projector – especially the ones that we used tonight. Every composer has a favorite sonic object. It might be a chamber quartet with a violin, a duo with flute and piano or a symphony orchestra. For me, the favorite sonic object has always been the film projector. It certainly goes back to the early days of my childhood: we had Super8 in the family and I was fascinated by the raw quality of the sound made by the machinery itself. Everything else, like the moving images, was attached to that sound.

How do you pick up the sounds from the projectors?

I put contact mikes inside, on the motor, on the transport, and on the shutter windows. I also have directional microphones from the outside pointing at the projector. More than half the work is making a microphone set-up that prevents feedback. The other half of the work is creating several families of sounds from each source. I do that by filtering and pitch shifting, and by using different strata of the sounds. You can compare it a bit to orchestration. I then lay out the sounds on my mixing desk. The composition is basically just the set-up – making sure there is no feedback – plus the families of sonic relations between the different sounds. When Jürgen starts I get a signal. Afterwards there is not much that I can change. You just have to enjoy.

Together with Jürgen, you have created a piece that fills the whole performance space, partly thanks to the use of sound. In a sense, this also relates to various experiments with cinema present in your own audiovisual work. Can you elaborate further on how you work with sound and images?

Put in abstract terms, my works create relationships between time and space. I compose sound for a three-dimensional space. For instance, *Quasar* is a quadrophonic piece. It works thanks to very subtle timing. What you enjoy in the music is this timing and not a series of sound events with a formal progression. If you listen closely, there is not really much more than a bit of grey noise placed in the space, one which appears and fades away. Timing is crucial. What I do with sound is very closely related to what people try to do with a camera: to capture three-dimensional space onto a flat surface. Filmmakers compose this experience with a camera and editing, I do it with spatial sound.

I was never only a composer of music, my works have always had a visual relationship. For instance, I started by making music for silent movies. I am still doing that twice a year at the Musée D'Orsay in Paris. For me, there is no separation between my visual work and my work in sound. I don't know if you should necessarily call what I do synaesthetic, but sound and vision are certainly not separated. The same is true of my work on video. Sometimes I really don't know if I am working on the sound or on the visuals.

Sometime during 2002 I started to develop a practice in which I could work in both media at the same time and in a way which suited me. This was after two or three pieces of software that were already available, and I had been using, were further developed, and made this practice possible. That was a breakthrough for me.

Your work is often quite minimal - as you say, there is no formal progression and hardly a narrative, yet the work often manages to capture the visitor in an immersive sound and vision experience.

Creating such an experience of immersion is only one aspect. A more important aspect is to try to create works that invite the audience. The work is an invitation to acknowledge that this is something minimal, but that you are full of memories as a listener and viewer. If it works as an invitation, you can fill-in the piece with your own memories. My frame is half-empty and you are invited to complete it.

So, as in your piece *Nuuk*, it is like creating an emotional opening through a slow-moving image or a sound that is quite static?

Yes. My work is rather empty. There is a lot of open space, there is not much movement, not a lot is filled in, and there is hardly any editing. In the language of cinema that means it is empty. But this emptiness allows the visitor to fill-in the work with their own experiences. This happens especially at the moment when you lose concentration on the work. I think that each work should connect to each person in a different way – the relationship between a member of the audience and the work should become a personal one. This makes my work unconvincing within the context of artworks that are full of themselves. But if my works were loud and yelled out a message, they would miss their purpose. I think my strong point is that I can create a perfect frame that is half full, yet doesn't collapse.

The works might be rather empty, but the experience of watching and listening is very fulfilling, certainly more so than listening to a piece of music with a formal progression or watching a conventional narrative movie.

For me, the perfect cinematic experience is just a moment in a space that is liberated from fear of the future and worries of the past. This is why I try to avoid rhythm, because rhythm is linear, there is always something coming up in the future. That makes rhythm 'entertaining' for a lot of people, and therefore sometimes they find my work rather boring.

You have performed in contexts like Paradiso, on a festival mainly of electronic dance. You also play and exhibit in venues of contemporary art. Does it matter to you where you perform and where your video-work is shown?

My work is not easily presented in all situations. But I don't care because I like the challenge. The more difficult it gets, the more interesting I find it. Of course it is easier, and maybe better for the work, when the circumstances are ideal, when there are no external distractions and when the projection is perfect. Next week I have an exhibition in an art museum, that production goes very smoothly. But in such cases it sometimes becomes very difficult to ascertain if it is the qualities of your work or the perfect circumstances of the situation that are responsible for a convincing experience. You need challenges and therefore I take risks by showing the work in more extreme circumstances, places that are noisy, like in a club or even an entertainment context. Even if the work then only irritates some people, it will give them an experience that they might come back to in years to come, when they are able connect to it. That is good. But in these situations, one should not be too worried about one's personal feelings as an artist.

What is the strangest location that you have showed your work?

I did a performance version of *Banlieu du Vide* in an Italian gay club during Saturday night prime time. It is a slightly melancholic piece, with images of empty streets. The result was a cacophony of voices, screaming and total confusion from the audience. I had to give up after about fifteen, maybe eighteen minutes. There was enormous resistance from the public. That was the most difficult performance I've ever done. I would still like to know how that booking could possibly have happened. But I know there were also people I touched with the work. You never know what happens later. As an artist you try to pass on what you think and feel, you try to have an effect on those who come to see and listen to your work.

Thomas Köner (1965) is a media artist who works with sound and images. He studied music in Dortmund and Arnhem and is considered to be an important figure in minimal electronic music. With sound composition as a basis, he has integrated performance and visual aspects into his work. Since 1992 he has collaborated with Jürgen Reble. With Andy Hellwig he was Porter Ricks; with Asmus Tietchens he formed Kontakt der Jünglinge. His discography contains more than 80 CDs, amongst which *Daikan* (2002), *Zyklop* (2003) and *Nuuk* (2004) are probably best known. His visual work is exhibited in museums, galleries and festivals, and he has recently started writing radiophonic works for German radio.

<http://www.koener.de/>

FILMOGRAPHY

Nuuk
Banlieu du Vide
Pneumo Monoxyd
Flutmarken Riga
Suburbs of the Void
Pendler Pilger Piloten
Peripheriques 2: Beograd
Peripheriques 3: Buenos Aires
Perepheriques 1: Harar (Anicca)
He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets