

DRONES ARE A DEFEAT OF TIME AND SPACE

Interview with Stephen O'Malley
ARIE ALTENA

This interview took place by telephone on Monday 26th November 2007, a week after we had talked in person following a performance by KTL at DNK-Amsterdam. Stephen O'Malley is probably best known as the guitar player with drone metal band Sunn (for which he also designs artwork) and as KTL with Pita (Peter Rehberg). At the time of the interview he was confirmed to play at the four hour drone event that will open the Sonic Acts XII festival.

AA I was struck by the variation in KTL's different live performances. I listened to about five of the downloadable mp3s and, as far as I could tell, it seemed that Peter Rehberg more or less follows the same sound and that you improvise around it?

SO'M That project involves quite a bit of improvisation. It is still a young project, although we have already put into it an enormous amount of work. KTL was formed to create music for a theatre piece by Gisèle Vienne and Dennis Cooper, entitled *Kindertotenlieder* after Friedrich Rückert's cycle of poems that Mahler set to music. The work process took many, many hours of rehearsal, preparation and production work. Through that process, Peter and I got to know each other musically pretty well, so we decided to do some gigs outside of the theatre

piece. The difference between the two presentations of KTL is that the live version tends to be more aggressive and spontaneous, while still using themes that we created for the theatre piece. The theatre performance has less amplifiers and less volume, and contains more polished clarity in its execution. We have the live archive online so that you can follow the development of two people improvising together over time.

How does the theatre production work on stage?
I understand that you are there playing the music?

In the script, a concert is happening in front of a group of people. We play on stage, inside the play. So there is an extra layer because another group of people is observing that interaction: the theatre audience. I have always been intimidated by the audience in concert situations. Playing concerts allows me to explore the volume and mass of sound in a way I cannot in my studio or during rehearsal. But I do not really like being in front of people when I perform. That is part of the reason why Sunn uses shrouds and other filters to blur the relation with the audience, and it is also why KTL blurs that relation by using a lot of smoke on stage and using a lighting strategy. In the theatre performance, that filter is already in-built, there is a level of distance and interpretation that the theatre audience has to go through. These implied levels of perceptual interference are interesting because they are just psychological. I appreciate the layers and filters that either separate me from the audience or allow the audience to re-orient with respect to what is happening. Smoke and lights are basic theatrical tools to achieve this. We use fog and lights to filter and blur the perception rather than for accent or to create contrasts.

Kurt Hentschläger describes how he used fog in his installation Feed to make the audience lose their orientation and immerse them in an experience.

The disorientation certainly happens. Outside on the street, while you are driving, fog constitutes an element of danger. But as long as you are in the safety of an enclosed, prepared space you can remove the feeling of danger and allow your brain to fill-in the blanks. The fog is a huge lens blurring what is happening between you and the stage. You might not see where the sound is coming from or who is creating which sound, or if there are any people on stage at all, or if that even matters. It allows you to have a different sort of experience, one that attempts to defy the need of logical analysis.

You mentioned how you work with the sound's mass and volume. Do you ever work with the space in which you play, as every space differs both architecturally and acoustically?

Working with the acoustic space is one of the foundations of our music. I have talked a lot about this over the past few years, but the more I talk about it, the

more I have the feeling I do not really have the knowledge. The compression ratio and the acoustic value of spaces obviously differs: an outside tent is totally different from an underground rectangle. With Sunn we prefer to play in an archaic space with a wooden or stone underground. Using a space for resonance is something that I do not know on the level of acoustical physics, it comes more from an intuitive feeling, from using things, from listening. It is closer to something like surfing than it is to wave physics: you are encountering a large physical event and you are riding it and playing with it. When I am playing with feedback I feel like I am part of a circuit that I can manipulate in various ways.

It's the level where you feel that something will happen when you play a loud D, but nothing when you play a loud C.

A low C-sharp is usually a good one, on most hollow stages. The combination of a C-sharp and D also works well. But the tonic note that we seem to use all the time is A. Even a low A is a clarifying sound. It is resonant and powerful in the sort of venue that we play a lot. I have explored these things a bit more in working with visual artists in installation settings. Then there is more preparation time than just two hours of sound-check. I feel that it is a field that I can spend a lifetime on, and maybe I will. The resonance of sound in space is probably one of the oldest concepts of music, maybe even going back to before proper rhythmic and melodic structures arose. Sunn has been really lucky to play in a few churches and cathedrals over the years - that has always been an awesome experience. Not only because of the initial resonance and reverb from a mass of stone and wood, but also the way the resonances compound over time. You can build up this physical resonance: after half an hour there is so much more going on. The density of that made me understand why such a space is considered spiritual and holy. If you are able to compose music that does this with voice over just a period of ten minutes, that is real transcendence.

Where does your interest in drones come from?
It seems to play a role in almost all your projects.

The original interest was in the pure physical energy. For me, drones are tied to an exploration of sound, an exploration of how much information can be present in a seemingly static presentation. In fact, it is hardly static at all, but in the language of music it can seem that way. I am also interested in the aspect of falling back into your consciousness through music, and getting away from the rational and logical parts of your thought processes, allowing your subconscious

to take over when you listen to music. Drone music allows that to happen almost in a meditative way. Somewhere closer to a drug, or a religious, spiritual or ceremonial experience than entertainment. Primarily, I listen to drone music when I'm actually playing. I like the experience of being in the sound, in the energy, in the moment, and then coming out of it. That moment might be ten minutes long and feel like an hour, or might be two hours long and seem to only last five minutes. Depending on how you let your subconscious focus, drones can really manipulate the sense of time. Drones are a defeat of the parameters of how you experience time and space.

La Monte Young understood very well how to deal with drones. He really had it nailed down with his *Dream House*, which has cushions and incredible plush carpeting so soft that you can sit down on it, and are encouraged to do so. It allows the listener to really experience the drones. I think there is even a kitchen there that serves food and drink. And then there is another room that has books and other things that you can use if you need to get your brain back into normal mode. Probably the best way to get your brain back into linear mode is to start reading.

Do you see images when you play or listen to drones, or is it just sound?

I am interested in music because it has inseparable visual aspects for me. Or maybe it sparks imaginative aspects in your brain which seem visual, whereas you are really only exploring the sound. The interpretation of sound goes beyond the audio part, beyond the physical part, and into the visual. Visual parts of your brain are being stimulated by sound because the sound is so engaging.

How does it then work when you make a soundtrack for a film, like you did with KTL for the silent movie *Phantom Carriage* by Swedish director Victor Sjöström?

That project came together very quickly (removed comma here) because the budget was quite small. We worked in a really broad way trying to compound the emotional sense of oppressive dread which runs throughout the film. It is just one emotion, but I think that when our music is applied it really emphasizes that aspect in the film. I was trying to capture a mood which partially comes through the visuals and certainly comes through the acting and the scenario. Because it is monochromatic, the film is more open to interpretation by sound. There is so much room for addition in this situation. I like the tension created between the seemingly disparate style of musical interpretation to this classic work of film.

To talk about sound in visual terms is very creative and very basic. With Sunn we are always doing that. We are not saying things like: "why don't you hone in on that 64 - 68 modulation". I have done that with other projects. When we play back rough mixes in the studio, it is instantly so visual – visual scenarios happen in the head for all of us. Until a few years ago I was using a lot of metaphors to describe what we were doing. That has always been part of the picture for people who listen to our music. But then people said things like:

"Isn't your music like a black swamp where you are being sucked down", and using other suicide and death-related metaphors. Actually, my musical experience is an intensely pleasurable one, which does not have anything to do with death or suicide.

A few years ago I would have said that the music is a mirror: what you see, is what is in your own head, in your own imagination. But over time I realized it is more complex and psychological. You can certainly trigger, or rather suggest, certain types of images or moods. It is what we did with *The Phantom Carriage*. We used heavy long tones, blurry sounds, lo-frequency stuff. I guess that is a threatening sound, it is foreboding: something is going to happen and it will be a big event, because only a big event can make such a sound. Such subconscious thinking still rules the imagination in some ways, which is fine. People say it is heavy, but heavy just means that the density is high. It can be negative, but heavy can also be an incredibly dense positive emotion, a dense joy or dense confusion. A heavy mood is simply a mood of an incredible density.

Stephen O'Malley is a musician and designer. He is a member of the drone metal group Sunn, and plays in Ginnungagap, KTL and Lotus Eaters. Amongst his many other collaborations there are those with Greg Anderson, Dylan Carlson (Earth), Oren Ambarchi, Masami Akita, Attila Csihar and the visual artists Banks Violette and Nico Vascellari.

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