
Book reviews

Bernd Schulz (ed.), *Felix Hess: Light as Air*. Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg, Germany, 2001. 127 pp., CD. ISBN 3-933257-65-4. RRP 35 Euros

Bernd Schulz (ed.), *Robin Minard: Silent Music – Between Sound Art and Acoustic Design*. Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg, Germany, 1999. 143 pp., CD. ISBN 3-933257-13-1. RRP 25 Euros

Christina Kubisch, *KlangRaumZeitLicht*. Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg, Germany, 2000. 134 pp., CD. ISBN 3-933257-38-7. RRP 36 Euros

Not too long ago, I received my copy of the January/February 2003 issue of *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, commonly known as 'NZ', and had what might be called a good news, bad news moment. The good news was their theme for this issue was *Klangkunst*, 'sound art' in English. *Klangkunst* is used primarily as a synonym for sound installations here. My positive reaction was that our theme for this issue of *Organised Sound* is finally getting the attention it deserves. The bad news was, dare I admit, that they beat us to it!

Sound art is a very important medium in Germany as is easily discovered in the NZ issue. It contains overviews – primarily, though not solely concerning German artists; more philosophical submissions dealing with very important issues including where this work actually fits into the greater scheme of things; young and more established artists' statements; gallery/festival directors' views; descriptions of specific *Klangkunst* performance spaces; and the link with this series of reviews, a discussion concerning the specialist publisher, Kehrer Verlag.

This publishing company was founded in 1995 and is known for its books on fine art and photography. The first volume in their *Klangkunst* series was published the following year and focused on the work of Rolf Julius. Other titles include the three to be discussed here as well as portraits of the work of Terry Fox and Hans Peter Kuhn and the catalogue of the 2002 group exhibition at the City Gallery in Saarbrücken – a gallery specialised in sound art – entitled *Resonanzen*. The gallery director, Bernd Schulz has edited two of the three volumes in this review. Each book includes a CD, a choice I find quite odd, something I shall return to in the discussions below.

The three volumes

Kehrer has clearly chosen a very laudable template for these books. There is a series of invited essays from specialists and other artists in the field discussing the work of the artist in question. This is accompanied by the words of the artist

through interview and/or short texts. The sections towards the back of each volume are more documentary including a biography, lists of (selected) works including their description, lectures, performances and exhibitions, recordings, a short biography of the contributors and information about each volume's CD. Throughout the books, there are loads of images of the artists' work, many in colour. This template works very well, especially when investigating the work of more than one artist. But most important to readers of *Organised Sound* who may not be fluent in German, all of these books are bilingual, the English translations being of a very high standard in general.

Felix Hess: Light as Air

Not that these books are at all in competition with each other, but in many ways I enjoyed this book the most. Many of the sections were extremely readable, that is for a general public, especially the artist's own texts. Felix Hess lives in the north-east of The Netherlands, but spent several years working in Australia as well. His English language texts are delightful to read. This might be due to the rather unorthodox career he has had following a traditional academic study in the sciences leading to his doctorate (aerodynamics of the boomerang) and scientific publications including *Scientific American*. Although his creative work goes back decades, the decision to bring this work to the fore occurred rather late in his career. This unusual combination may or may not have influenced his writing style, one of short sentences ranging from poetic thoughts to specific descriptions accompanied by illustrations reflecting how he builds some of his 'electronic sound creatures' and other objects.

The editor provides an excellent contextual introduction where he identifies Hess's work as 'listening installations' (p. 15). Hess 'create[s] a situation of special attention [in his installations] in which the observer can experience complexity' (p. 16). His creatures are interactive with other machines, commencing with simple patterns of behaviour and evolving to more complex ones. So where does this complex behaviour come from? Hess is very open about the key influence for this type of sound installation. Whilst working in Australia, he was taken by the sounds of frogs offering their 'beautiful three-dimensional concert' (p. 32). Hess suggests that these frogs have been his teachers (pp. 43–7). He claims that they react to all aural stimuli. In Hess's terms, a reaction is classified as one of eagerness; no reaction is one of shyness. This eagerness/shyness system forms the basis of his complex systems.

Another aspect of his work has been called ‘cracklers’ in English, small machines that react to air pressure fluctuations. His CD contains one single ca. 20’ track based on 120 hours of measurements of the fluctuating air pressure from North Sea waves sped up 360 times, transposing the ‘song and dance’ of the sea from infrasound into the range of audible frequencies.

As suggested, his short texts are most enjoyable, filled with his dramaturgy, sometimes in a manner of train of thoughts. The world of soundscapes is never far from his mind. He enters the ongoing musical debate about how we listen by offering three modes: listening for meaning, following sounds in time (e.g. music) and following sounds in space (e.g. frogs).

One work that I found quite striking was one where no sounds were discussed, *Icelamp*. This concerns an ice cube hanging on a wire which is connected to an air-pressure-controlled power regulator with a transformer. At times it can glow bright orange making one wonder whether there is a presence of fire in ice. The surrealists have a cause for jealousy.

Robin Minard: Silent Music – Between Sound Art and Acoustic Design

Robin Minard is a Québécois who has been working in Germany for quite some time. A founding member of the Canadian Electroacoustic Community, he comes from a very rich background in terms of sound. Nevertheless, as a child he claims to have had too many bad experiences in the labyrinth of underground passageways in Montreal with its omnipresent commercial music. This understandable unease led him to making music for public spaces which places itself between sound art and acoustic design (p. 8) in which music and visual art converge.

His musical interests range from Cage’s relationship with silence to Ligeti’s timbre-based composition (and his interest in space) to his desire to create a contemporary dialectic between what *musique concrète* and *elektronische Musik* once represented. A summary of remarks made about his work now follows. Schulz makes the following statement when considering Minard’s approach to sound art (what Schulz calls an ‘inexact term’), ‘The difference between the work of art and reality, as well as the boundary between art and life, now prove to be a construction of perception. This means that the former distinction between artistic and inartistic material – in music, the distinction between sounds and ‘noises’ and in the visual arts, between material ‘worthy of art’ and materials of everyday life – can no longer be maintained’ (p. 25). The artist adds: ‘The cause for this rise in [sound installation] activity lies more deeply within a basic need for artists to merge (or re-merge) art with life; with a need for them to find new and socially relevant modes of artistic expression . . . In my own work, the idea of sound installation has meant something very specific: the integration of sound in public environments and therewith the merging of works not only with existing architecture but also with everyday situations and real functioning surroundings’ (p. 72). ‘We must conceive an art which takes the environment into consideration which enters into a relationship and a dialogue with the space it occupies’ (p. 53). One wonders whether he has perhaps been influenced in some way by his countryman, R. Murray Schafer.

Minard has left the concert hall to create ‘open works of art . . . [yet he] still considers himself as a composer’ (pp. 25–6). This remark is quite telling, as one often confronts the somewhat naïve remark that sound installation artists lack the refined approach to composition that composers possess. Kubisch, too, has something to say about this. ‘“Componere” means “put together”. And installation means “to set something up in a room” . . . Filling a sound installation with sounds thus appears to be something technical, something for craftsman. But composing is not a virtue, it’s a musical activity. I see no great difference’ (Kubisch, p. 89). Minard’s reaction: ‘We are no longer dealing with a traditional musical language. The composer’s approach and intentions have changed. Whereas the traditional composer might, for example, have chosen a sound material for its narrative significance or symbolic meaning, choices now are based on quite different criteria, ones which often have to do with psycho-acoustic and architectural concerns’ (pp. 80–1).

Acknowledging Minard’s thought that other than in ‘concert halls, theatres and special conference rooms, the ear is often not a factor that enters into consideration’ (p. 52), Barbara Barthelmes suggests that ‘as paradoxical as it may sound, [Minard’s] “sound environments” are intended to create refuges of stillness in the midst of the fullness of acoustic stimulation, to make spaces acoustically more pleasant, and to direct attention to the aural qualities of architecture as well as the reverse, the architectonic or spatial qualities of sound’ (p. 53). Minard calls this concept the ‘articulated space’. Helga de la Motte calls such installation spaces ‘non-transferable, . . . indissolubly interwoven with a concrete space at a specific time’ (p. 44).

Minard is an artist dealing with what he calls ‘relative-fidelity’ (p. 74). He has been known to use large numbers of piezo (very small) loudspeakers, in the case of his *Still/ Life* that number approached 6,000, often in tandem with the placement of tuned resonators. The spatialisation in his work can be extremely enlightening. In discussing his *4 Spaces*, de la Motte describes the experience of the sounds seeming to ‘roll like pebbles around the listener’ (p. 41), pieces where ‘small loudspeakers attached to the walls of the space like fungus or lichen trees can become optical “attractions”’ (*idem*).

The book’s combination of text and image is truly enlightening. The CD, again, as worthy as the collection of the chosen two pieces may be, seems to miss the point of the ‘being there’ aspect of his work, yet gives a distinct flavour of Minard’s sound world.

KlangRaumZeitLicht (Christina Kubisch)

This final book has been separated from the other two for a number of reasons of which I shall name but two. First of all, the editor of the other two books was not identified as having been involved with this one. Secondly, this book has been published as a catalogue for an exhibition in Rüsselsheim (near Frankfurt) and therefore is heavily based on works shown in that exhibition – it seems less to reflect the completeness of the other two volumes, perhaps due to Ms Kubisch’s enormous successes throughout the years.

The artist has a talent in choosing enticing titles for her work, for example, *Ecouter les murs* (listen to the walls),

Klanglabyrinth (sound labyrinth), *Tree Conference* and *Mouseware*. It comes therefore as no surprise that the book itself has been provided with an unorthodox title, which would read *SoundSpaceTimeLight* in English.

As stated above, although this book follows the Kehrer format, it is much more a catalogue for her retrospective in Rüsselheim's Opel Villas than a general survey of her work. It opens with a word from the Mayor and includes a festive speech for her earning the Heidelberg Artist's Prize. However, for example, her commissions to make city pieces are not mentioned throughout.

Another difference here can be found in the article by art historian, Antje von Graevenitz, 'The exchange of sound identities', which provides an excellent philosophical foundation for Kubisch's work. There is no equivalent article in the other two volumes. Where Minard seems to want to create synergies with his spaces, Kubisch creates sound installations which, according to von Graevenitz, 'appear to emancipate themselves from the site through an indeterminate non-belonging and a strangeness; they thus capture all attention' (p. 22). Referring back to Erik Satie's (in)famous *Musique d'ameublement*, von Graevenitz writes that 'Kubisch prefers to evoke a room climate or room temperature. The aspect of bewilderment is always present . . . the listener always knows that additional sound qualities have been introduced, as if the room were newly attired' (p. 26). Kubisch, like Minard, has a preference for 'relatively quiet sounds, because large, constantly loud sounds are associated differently, they trigger other emotions and seem more besetting' (p. 91). There is a sense of history to the sounds. Her interviewer, Christoph Metzger, suggests: 'You concern yourself with a kind of tracking and trailing, and your works show that many things have a past that can be seen only when they are put in the right light' (p. 82).

An example found on the CD (which includes four pieces), *Mouseware*, exemplifies her recent work. Von Graevenitz writes: 'Kubisch arranged computer mice in a star on a round table and, at regular intervals around the edge of the table, placed ten real mice cast in resin that she borrowed from a museum of natural history. The exhibition visitor now heard soft clicking noises and could hardly tell whether they were the sounds of PC mice or the rustling of live mice' (p. 32). Obviously a work like this demands a strong emotional and intellectual reaction from the spectator. Again, the audio only recording seems to need at least the photo in the book for context.

A final word

After reading through these three volumes, my immediate reaction is 'let's have more!'. Between the NZ volume briefly introduced above, books like these, this issue of *Organised Sound* and future publications in this area, the sound installation world will be offered some of the attention it deserves. My one gripe in this review is the choice of an audio CD for such volumes. A sound installation is a holistic experience involving the ears *and* the eyes. Although a CD-R or DVD recording of sound installation work only represents a document as opposed to the physical (interactive) experience of a sound installation, if I were involved in this series, that would be my chosen medium. Kehrer Verlag's choice of offering a taste of the types of sounds used in an installation

seems really quite a compromise and would better accompany a discussion of the artists' sound-based, i.e. not audio-visual, pieces. That is, to the extent that any of them makes such works.

Leigh Landy

Ros Bandt, *Sound Sculpture. Intersections in Sound and Sculpture in Australian Artworks*. Craftsman House, Sydney 2001. ISBN 1877004-02-2

This book lies at the intersection of a number of streams of thought, including sound-art, sculpture and Australian experimentalism. The author's life-time passion for, and contribution to, the subject and five years of concentrated research, has resulted in an attractive and informative monograph.

Listening changes, not just according to time, but according to place, its acoustic context and the time given to it by the viewer/auditor. In a visually dominated 'non-hearing' society, sound sculpture challenges the traditional Western epistemological sequence of beginning, middle and end as the only well-formed means of expression and experience. Australia's geographical and multicultural diversity yields a markedly different acoustic and cultural diversity from one location to another: from the 40,000 years of Aboriginal elders singing the land to kilometres of wind-activated communication cables to oil drums, grain silos, factories, portable immersive environments and interactive gallery installations.

Sound Sculpture is divided into five sections: Place as Acoustic Space, Sonic Objects, Time and Motion, Human Engagement, Installations and Sound Designs, and Spatial Movement. It includes works either made in Australia or by Australian artists, and rather than provide critical evaluations of created works, aims at describing the wide variety of work in this genre, especially that created since the 1950s. Bandt has chosen the works for interest in the way their sonic and sculptural elements intersect and for their diversity ranging from silent musical icons through non-intentional sounding sculptures to music machines, musical sculptures, spatial music installed sound, and actual and virtual sound environments.

Although not an historically exhaustive document, there are references to some precedents, not the least of which is the Free Music machines of Percy Grainger, whose quintessentially explorative and quirky approach has implicitly laid the foundation for an Australian approach to this genre. In 1980s Australia some twenty people were working in the field. Twenty years later there are about one hundred and fifty artists who are becoming recognisable as a group both internationally and at home.

Whilst sound sculpture as an art form is difficult to document, Bandt makes an excellent attempt to do so by providing a critical commentary interspersed with copious photographs, snippets of scores and an accompanying CD of audio 'snapshots' of many of the works. The book design by Andrew Trevillian is a valiant attempt to present the work to the broad audience it certainly deserves.

David Worrall