

Interview with Sam Auinger On Flusser, Music and Sound.

This interview took place on 28th May 2014 in Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin.

Annie Gog) I sent you the translations of two essays "On Music" and "On Modern Music", taken from a lecture series on "The Influence of Existential Thought Today" from Brazil in 1965. What were your first impressions?

Sam Auinger) My first impression was that the first two essays worked like a time-machine. I could immediately feel the impetus of Flusser, I experienced personally how he tried to get young minds into his ideas. It was really written for students, not his colleagues. It reminded me of how I first met Flusser at the Ars Electronica in the late 1980s. I met him around 1987 or 1988 when he gave a talk on digital memory and the digital brain. After his talk, a friend of mine and I went up to him and asked him to do a little interview, which he kindly agreed to. Unfortunately this cassette has been lost. I remember he was very patient with us, and he was very passionate about his topic. So it brings me back to these articles, he was fascinated with the technology of holographic pictures - for him it was the big thing that would change the world in the future. For sure he was not right in this, reality turned out different, maybe it will one day, but at the time he was convinced this was really just about to happen. He explained each of his terms following a lineage of the Greeks up until now. He really tried to give our young brains a scope from which you could operate and make clear that the social and cultural brain arose from all these things. So this was my first connection when I read these papers.

AG) Would you agree with how Flusser is perceived, particularly in German media theory - as having "a head without ears" (as quoted in Wolfgang Ernst's article) or as in Dietmar Kamper's reflection on the absence of body and speaking and hearing in Flusser's work?

SA) I would agree in a way, but only if I only consider his writing. If I think about how he used his own body and was engaged in a situation in the momentum of a room by trying to get his ideas over to other people, he was a very physical person. When he writes about music, he gives all these explanations about how music happened and how Greeks understood it as the purest art, from ancient times to organize society and the cycles of time, but he is not really exploring the sensation of vibration or feeling resonant. There is not even a small clue that architecture or

environment could be psychotropic sonically. This makes him a bit old-fashioned - he has to quantify this, for example music is more pure than science and technology. This doesn't make sense to me. But we shouldn't forget these two papers were for a lecture, and in that sense he is Flusser at his best. He scopes out a landscape that gives me so much ground to develop it for myself and experience and explore it.

AG) He talks a lot about the idea of "pure music" in these two essays. An idea which reoccurs later in his German work. For me this was initially quite irritating and out of place, as this idea of pure and absolute music has come under a lot of criticism in twentieth century - for example the idea of the artist genius. Although it must be said that he links pure music deeply with mathematics. How did you read this idea of "pure music"?

SA) He brings it back to Pythagorus and Ancient Greeks, who are obviously the starting point in our culture for looking for the ideas for the purpose of the idea and not combining it with a special need apart from this. This is one reason I think he is so fascinated by pure music. Even if I don't think he is completely right. I think it is a particularly European phenomenon - our history and how the world was organized had to be divided into the profane and the music for the gods, church and rulers, which had to be abstract in a way. It comes out of the four-voice harmony, the human range of singing, the human range of how we listen, they have constantly something to do with us - what Flusser misses is that even so-called pure music was made under certain purposes - the enormous amount of output from Bach is only explained by the need of the church to have new works each sunday as this was the paradigm of how to worship god. This is why composition rules had to be that sophisticated so that a small musical idea could be used in so many different forms to produce a piece of work. When he talks about modern music, he skips Schoenberg's 'Farben' - he skips the first piece in the twentieth century that is really composed with sound, it cannot be played on a piano. Another thing missing, in the second lecture when he talks about how thoughts get an abstract form and at the same time how thoughts became concrete, is that he is not aware of all the processes of the twentieth century of electronic music - there was still the controlling composer's mind like Stockhausen's but there were many composers inspired by technological processes. So the moment when the Edison phonograph came up and recordings were possible, there was a new line of feedback in between the ear and the composer's mind.

AG) - Well, he does mention at the end of the second lecture how "electronic music invades the realm of technology in order to adapt to its structure" referring to tape composition, then he says

"traditional music is invaded by the realm of technology in order to be distorted by it"...

SA) But he means that traditional music means a normal performance in a room, and if you record it is a kind of distortion. But he doesn't seem to get that technology can become a research tool. If a composer goes out on to the street or if he makes mistake in the studio and gets inspiration from it, then this is not taken as a creational thing, technology becomes to act in a different way on the tool-level with the composer. He doesn't talk about the restrictions of technology. When I did my first computer music compositions in the early 1980s I had to wait seventeen hours to render a 50 second piece, so this means you think very much in the conditions of the system. Flusser prefers to keep it on the abstract idea level and I don't think he took "pure music" seriously in that sense. I like his division between shouting music and hermetic music. But he misses points like Eric Satie. He makes background music to a senseless or meaningless music. But as a kind of audible wall paper, like a characteristic of the space. Since he didn't write very much on these topics, he was smart enough to realize what a huge topic this was. For 1965 these ideas of quiet music and shouting music this must have been such a radical idea. In the 1960s you still had to search for all your records and you didn't have everything at your fingertips. He obviously didn't have the chance to read Jonathan Sterne's "The Audible Past", to understand that also through speakers a new kind of reality also emerges. What he also overlooks in the twentieth century with "musique concrete" and Pierre Schaeffer, how much the psychoacoustic becomes a part of this.

AG) The relationship between music and mathematics appears a lot in these two articles too. He speaks about how music is pure concreteness. He also relates to non-Western practices such as yoga as being able to access concrete experience. It is fair to say he had an awareness of music, but knew he was not an expert in contemporary music. More important is the way it fits into his structure of thoughts - for example the mathematization of music as electronic music, he says "electronic music is our new master" - perhaps similar to the way he talked about holographs - a trajectory from how we have thought in a linear consciousness - so perhaps he misplaced this.

SA) He talks about the universality of music and mathematics. but this only works on a common level from today's point of view, only to a certain level of complexity. If we agree on Newtonian mathematics, we can come up with the same result to the equation all around the world. But in the realm of quantum mathematics, it depends on the set-up - I want to say that the more complex it is, the more hermetic it becomes, each piece for itself. He also says about hearing musical pieces to understand something like Einstein's relativity theory, as if just to give another

idea about how not to understand it. For me the biggest hook in all of this, is that he does not mention the creative power of playing, music and mathematics are both systems in which you can play. He has a very serious approach to it.

AG) Flusser talks more about sound in "The Gesture of Listening to Music". He talks about sound as sound waves transmitting an acoustic message, as one which can bridge the gap between us and the world - overcomes the Hegelian dialectic of the unhappy consciousness as acoustic communication ...

SA) ... but again I think what is missing again, that it in order to consider that our experience in the world is like a pure feedback system - we need reflections, sound reflects in very complex ways, that's why our spatial sense is so (important)...The feedback comes through the floor, through any kind of object, that is why you can say resonance is embedded time in space. When you quote Flusser as you did before, it seems he still believed that the transfer of information in the auditive is similar to visual, and he does not understand that the visuality is a series of snapshots and audio impression is a continuum, it has more to do with duration, time and with the elasticity of senses. He is right that space, sound and listening put us into the world. It is so fascinating in the first paper, how he sketches out whole of human history, then after two pages he turns it around and puts it back into your brain.

AG) Last question, in your own work you emphasize the concept of a "hearing perspective", as a reaction against the visual as a "source of truth" (O+A, 2009: 63). This means hearing constitutes a different way of knowing..

SA) When Bruce (Odland) and I came up with this concept, we found ourself in a world dominated by one sense. But when you observe your listening and how you get audio information, then you realize it wasn't a joke of nature to give you a setup of senses, some that sense far away and some nearer. You need all of the senses all together and there is an important interplay and interaction. Different tools offer different possibilities. At least that is the difference between the eye and the ear.

AG) In your work, sonic thinking and hearing perspective is so central. In Flusser's work most his examples come from the visual. But at the same time he was trying to describe a historical transition into which new technology could bring us, with an emphasis on could. Because his thinking is lacking the hearing perspective and sonic thinking, would you have liked to expand

this in his theory?

SA) No, well at the time I met him, new technology was still such a wonder, everyone was so fascinated with it. What I do in my work, with a focus on listening, is to integrate it into the other senses, but I realize that he had the ordinary intellectual disease, that he was sunken into books - maybe he did yoga or other exercises - but he only seemed to trust logical thought. At least I did not get the impression he was the sort of person who could live with anything that could not make sense to him. I think he had many conclusions that were deductive and referential and of a formalized thought. His thoughts themselves are not pure thoughts, they are already formed into language. In myself I observe I am definitely not only thinking in language, I think in visual clues and audio clues too.

AG) Yes, as this was one of his fundamental theories. That he as a textual person, he said he did not know how his grandchildren would think, as they would be brought up with different codes.

SA) In this sense he was very right in my perspective, in that we would be thinking in different to just a textual based thinking. It is tragic in a way, that from the Renaissance on, the visual domain was producing so much output so fast, and started to dominate the way we think. That's the way he thinks about pure music, he puts it more or less into a geometrical form, so how he thinks about mathematics and music as something you can easily visualize. I think like us all, he was a child of his time.