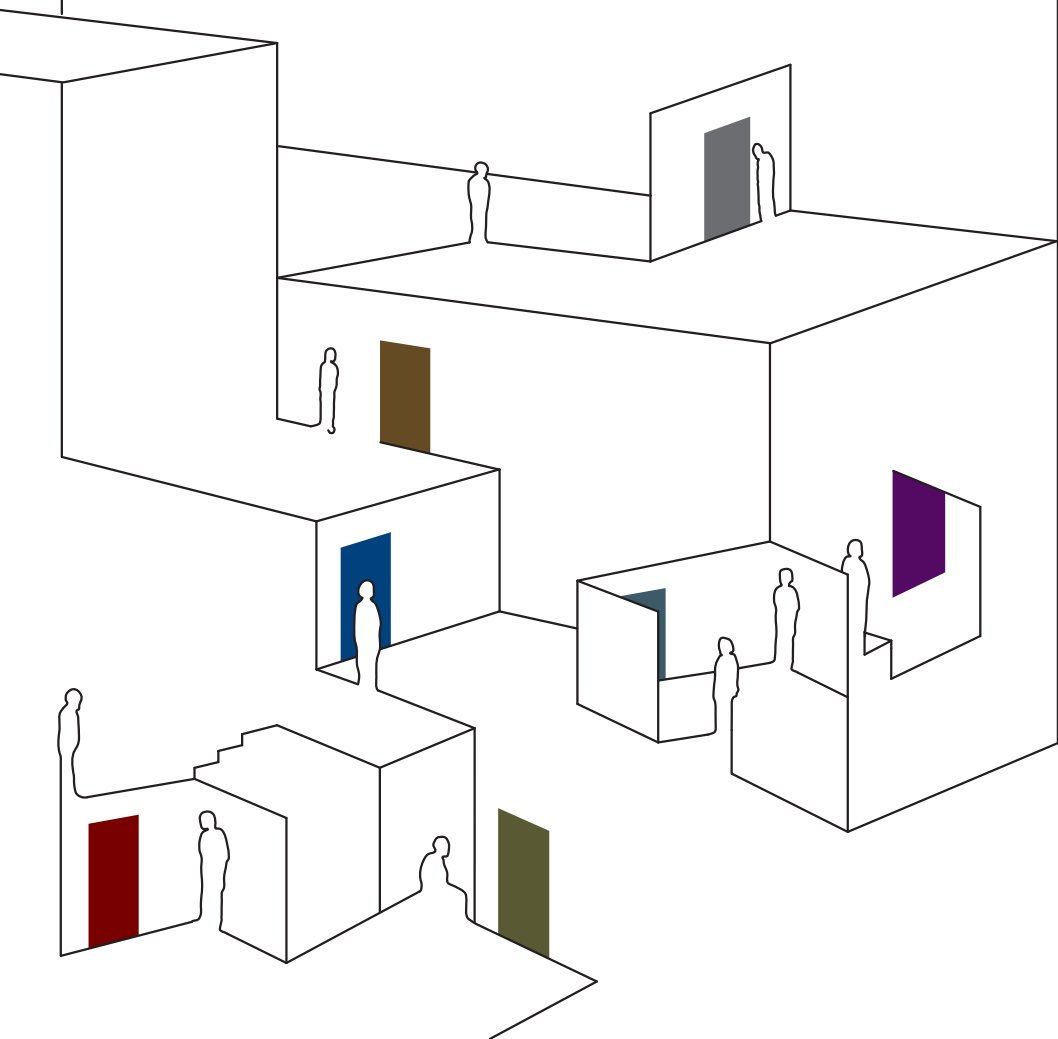


EAVESDROPPING

the indiscretions of the ear



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Audio

<http://eavesdropping.humbug.me>

Eavesdropping

The Indiscretions of the Ear

Attempting to contain sound inside buildings is like trying to hold water in clasped hands. In terms of acoustic isolation, architectural barriers often fall short of their warrants. This is all the more evident if we compare the indiscretion architecture allows the ear to the privacy it grants to the eye. Sound tends to spill out of charted borders, it ignores concepts of property, it is a perpetual trespasser. While propagating through materials of varying density, sound changes its morphology. Gradually becoming farther removed from its original source and less recognizable, it eventually turns into background noise. Before fading into hum or silence, along its dissipative course it carries information to places that were never intended to be reached, and is picked up by more or less attentive ears. The fear of being constantly monitored, epitomized by George Orwell in 1984, has always been true in the acoustic domain. At any time, there might be someone listening behind a door, on the other side of a wall or across the hallway. Eavesdropper is a medieval English word referring to a person secretly listening to other people's private conversations or activities. This type of indiscretion, a "spying with the ears", has been regulated for centuries by both moral and legal sanctions. But listening to others, whether allowed or not, is something we cannot avoid doing.

Reflecting on these ideas, a group of sound artists and composers was invited to create a set of site-specific interventions in Villakabila, the former embassy of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in The Hague. The artists were challenged with a particular task: to make a piece in the form of an installation or a performance, that was to be heard only outside of the room in which it was going to take place. It was requested that each room be left accessible to the audience, but when a visitor would enter a room, any activity generating sound at that location should cease, as if the intruding visitor was interrupting a private affair. In this way approaching ears and eyes would be addressed separately. Failing to unite the two sensory modalities, visitors would be confronted with the ambiguity of their perceptions and forced to perform their own reconstruction of the unfolding events.

Discussing Noisy Laundry in Public

Fragments of a conversation between artists and curator

Anne: *eavesdropping*... a beautiful word to begin with. In German there is no single word to describe the act of (un)intentional listening to a conversation which is not meant for one's ears, or the process of (more or less accidentally) overhearing a conversation which takes place out of sight but at hearing distance.

Matteo: In Swedish it's *tjuvlyssnare*, which literally can be translated as *listen-thief*.

Anne: Well, there is the innocent, accidental eavesdropping but also the intentional kind, eavesdropping meant to acquire (steal) information or to learn about someone else's secret(s). An embassy is a building full of secrets, and Villakabila is a former embassy building, a run down villa with a leaking roof, stranded near the beach in Den Haag with a basement full of hidden treasures, secret documents that are not meant to be seen by anyone...

Matteo: Having had the opportunity to work in this building - about five months ago I asked you if you would be interested in producing a new work based on a very specific format, making a piece that would be heard only outside of the room in which it was located, which would stop when people entered the room. What was your first reaction?

Anne: The proposal to create a work that visitors would only hear from a certain distance was inspiring and frightening at the same time. Inspiring because the countless (only partly stripped) layers of wallpaper and added plastic finishes on walls, floors and ceilings suggested hidden microphones and cameras everywhere in the building, both in the past and in the present. A perfect place for conspiracy and/or secret (service) activity. Frightening because maybe this particular embassy was no longer financially supported because its staff belonged to the wrong political or ethnic group - as part of the gruesome reality of a country torn apart by war.

Matteo: How do you think that the *eavesdropping* format worked out in the end? Did you find the limitations stimulating or did you consider them an unnecessary imposition on my part?

Michele: The concept you proposed for Eavesdropping was very complex and for me the main problem was to create a site specific installation in a place I've never been before. But furthermore the fact that you're an

artist too, made me feel that you might probably have a very clear idea of what you wanted to be done in the Villa (what you have been expecting from us), so that the concept you proposed for me was kind of too tight. Therefore I thought to start considering your concept from different sides as to rouse deeper urges that I could have felt as starting points for a work. Working on something that may be heard only from outside the room made me think of “inside” as if its intimacy was threatened by the pressure of an “outside”. That pressure somehow restricts and broadens its freedom at the same time. It’s about equilibrium of two opposite forces. We live in that threshold, for without the pressure of outside the inside would have nowhere to go.

Lars: I think the common format was an interesting way to ensure unity across the works, yet allowing freedom to the artists. My first impression was that there would be more interaction between the installations, that the house would become a living orchestra, with sounds leaking from everywhere. I also first intended making a much more loud installation, with inspiration from the Danish composer Jeppe Just Christensens’ composition-instrument “Der Jäger” consisting of a large amount of falling cymbals. The result became very different than my first impression when the idea was presented, not all works really complied with the initial rules, but I think all works still related to the theme of eavesdropping in their own way, yet relating to each other in unintended ways.

Wen Chin: The idea of hearing sounds from everywhere, without identifying their origin or location triggered my imagination. I was curious of experiencing the disconnection between sound and image, and I wanted immediately to perform with this theme. I wanted to build a passage through sound, so I used a real passage in the house, the corridor on the first floor, where my studio is. Performing in my studio I broadcasted my voice to transducers placed behind the doors in the corridor. If visitors found and entered my room, I stopped and observed. Instead of looking at intruders, I sensed their existence in my room. After five hours, I found myself getting emotional, from being listened to and checked, with a mix of curiosity and frustration.

Robert: Initially, I found the concept to be both a clever way of unifying the interventions and also quite a forceful inhibition, like being told by your mother to stop banging on some pots and pans when she enters the kitchen, only to continue once again the moment she has left. I found this idea required my own interpretation. When inside my room, layered recordings of the space next door were softly played back. They were also moved around, creating an audible perspective of this nearby room found only within the constraints of mine. Yet, in order to confront the initial concept, when one was not inside my room, loud noise masked this eavesdropping from the outside.

Jeroen: I consider limitations like these often more liberating than more open formats. I think freedom can be the worst thing than can happen to an artist (or me). You are bound to a specific field in which you explore the limitations of it. In this case I interpreted the concept of eavesdropping to be useful in order to create a game-like dialogue between the independent sound installations and the audience. I thought it had the potential to create meaningful interference between all sound works. Mostly sound works which are presented in one big space disturb each other, in this case the disturbance created an extra layer.

Matteo: Especially the dialogue between Jeroen’s piece and those of BMB con. and Michele seemed to work out pretty well, don’t you think?

Lars: Yes, this is one of the examples of unspoken links that I felt came just from having the two works next to each other. I felt like both spying and being spied when I watched the performance of BMB con. through a small slit in the door with the singing radio radar of Jeroen turning above me.

Matteo: (looking towards BMB con.) Spying and being spied on... this feeling must also have applied to Justin and Roelf. You locked yourself up in a room with openings towards the house and the garden - while operating your hydraulic contraptions and moving around in the jungle of hanging pipes and wires you set up in there, suggesting something between an illegal distillery and a crazy honeymoon with the anarchist cookbook, did you manage to keep track of the presence (or absence) of visitors looking into your room?

Roelf: Well, obviously we noticed people peeping and even gatecrashing our private party! But we succeeded in keeping them out. We were way too busy with eavesdropping on our neighbors, to even consider inviting possible visitors in and presenting them a cup of our home brew. Besides they could have got wet!

Justin: It was also a bit strange - very different to being on stage and feeling the relationship that you have with the audience. In the beginning I found it difficult to just “play” and accept that no-one might be watching / listening, or on the other hand being surprised by visitors when I was having a “break”. In any case performing for such a long time called on a very different sort of timing than we are used to. I got into it though after a while...

Michele: I was especially amazed by how the sounds produced by BMB con. were resonating in the basement where my installation was and viceversa: the sounds were very similar in texture and tone. This created a kind of movement through the ceiling (or floor).

Matteo (looking towards Wen Chin and Michele): Both your pieces were directed at the physical boundaries of the room, turning them into a membrane capable of an inward and outward oscillation, like a speaker, but I can also see something very different - you could say that Wen Chin was attempting to escape from the room, while Michele was defending his space from external forces...

Michele: Having chosen to work in the basement, in the foundations of the building, I decided to place wooden beams vertically as to support the structure of the whole house from caving in. I thought of this as a symbolic attempt to prevent the inevitable future: one day the wooden ceiling will collapse.

Wen Chin: The character of the location was also the starting point for my piece. When I spend time in my studio, I start staring at the wall longer and longer. The wall and wall paper in that room naturally become the motive of my performance sequence.

Matteo: While tearing at the wall paper, you were also describing the other rooms around it. Visitors could imagine what was behind the doors in the corridor, by placing their ear on the doors and listening to your voice coming through. They could also try to imagine you speaking and tearing at the paper. One could think that your actions were aimed at removing these separations, to allow visitors to enter or you to exit, but imagination allows a different kind of encounter. How did the visitors react once they eventually found your room?

Wen Chin: Some of them stayed a long time in the room, expecting me to do something. Some children tried to talk to me, they called my name, and they didn't understand why I was not replying. Then they found out that I would only speak once they left the room, so they started playing with me by closing and opening the door. It's funny that some visitors came in several times and checked how many wall papers I had torn down.

Matteo (looking towards Acid Police): Your piece included a series of paintings representing the economy of the Dutch cultural sector. It reminded me of how the earliest accounts of writing are records of economic transactions. It took a long time before writing was employed for poetic purposes. Are you suggesting that our culture is returning to a state in which language can only signify economic value?

David: I don't know if I would describe our culture as "returning" to a state in which language only signifies economic value, as I'm not convinced this aspect ever really went away... For instance, the European languages that are today seen of as the most "beautiful", come from the





Jeroen Uyttendaele - *Dropper*
custom built radio transmitters and receivers



Lars Kynde - *Tubephone Champignon*
tubular bells with automatized piano hammers and photosensors





Michele Spanghero - *Because Tomorrow Comes* - wooden beams, speakers, movement sensor, 8-channel sound



Wen Chin Fu - *Jhih Chiang / Paper Wall* - performance with wireless microphone and transducers



Anne Wellmer - *Chamber/s for Leftover Ghosts* - for a room with voices, maps & musics hidden in vases, trunks & teapots and other objects

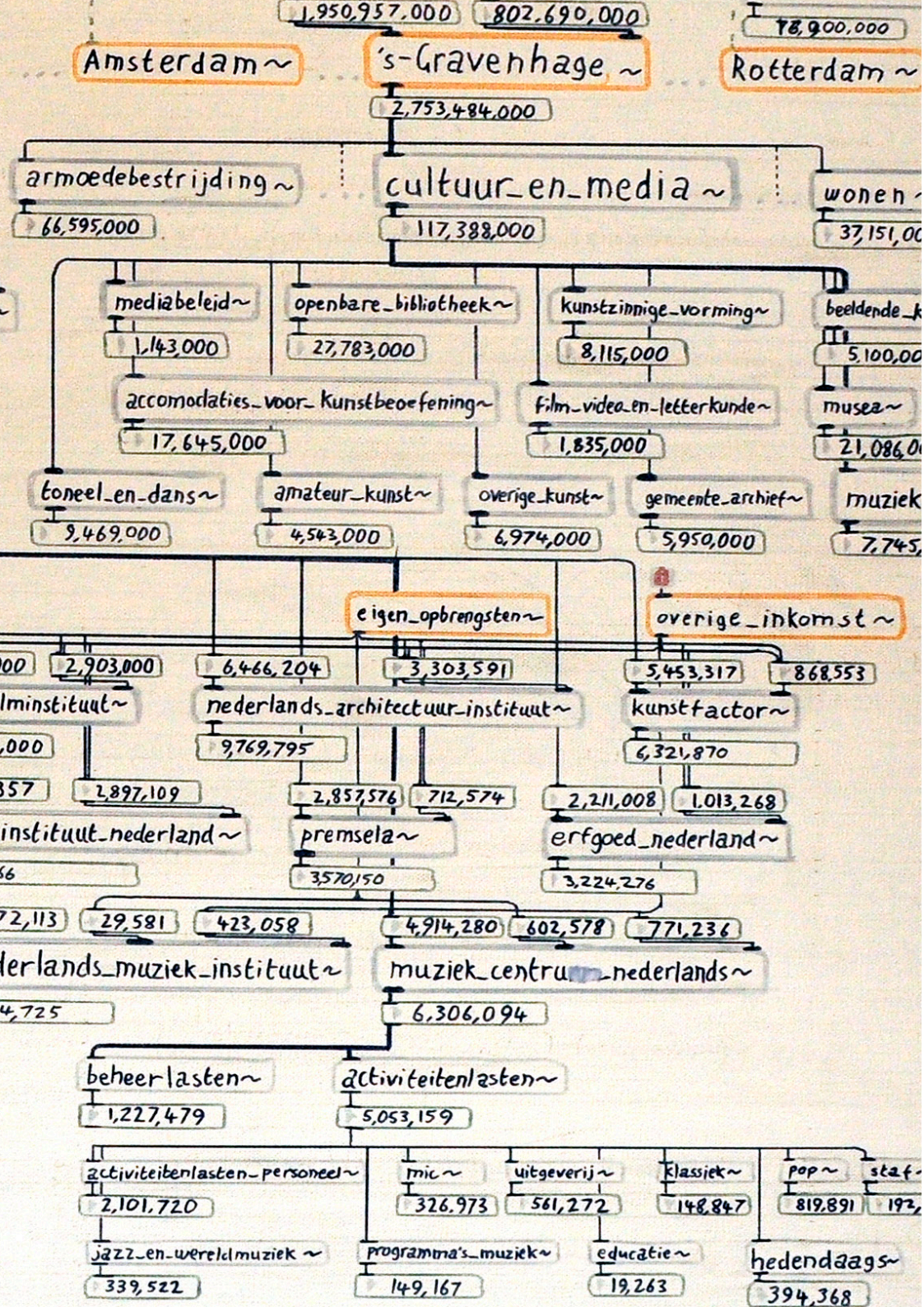




Acid Police - *Acid Police Noise Ensemble's Pars Pro Toto* - three Spaces, each contains itself, it's brothers, and their players, audience and superstructures







countries which were the most economically successful in the 19th Century - I don't think that this is a coincidence. Our perception of "beauty" is very much based on economic factors, for instance, when we talk about a "beautiful tone" on a violin, we often find that the level of "beauty" is directly proportional to the value of the instrument. I think that this "beauty" is defined by the cost of the instrument, rather than the other way around, and that a lot of our aesthetic conventions are defined by economic factors. Language and economics are interlinked to such an extent that I would even claim that we do ourselves and our art a disservice by discussing it in English - which is really one of the key tools of contemporary capitalism (and no doubt a language whose future "beauty" is now assured). I'm pushing for all art to be discussed in a language as disconnected from economic concerns as possible (in an ideal world these questions and answers would be in Welsh...)

Matteo: You are saying that power legitimizes aesthetic values, but the reverse is also true.

David: This is why it seemed important to also make a painting in which the audience could see where *our* money for this event was coming from - what ideological conception of art were we legitimating at the moment of performing? The audience could eavesdrop on both the government's ideology of culture as well as our place in it...

Matteo: In a practice such as sound art, that has little appeal on the commercial market, many artists tend to serve public institutions by creating works that address the theme of sound in public space, providing a form of publicity and legitimacy for these institutions.

David: Sound art, like any type of art, is an articulation of the economic system it operates within. Perhaps the increasing emphasis on public space is based on the fact that these works can receive money from not only the Beeldende Kunst (visual art) fund, but also from the Cultuur Participatie (cultural participation) fund, as well as the funds of the local city and provinces (cities are always glad of extra attractions to bring in tourism money). The multiple outlets of monetary support encourage artists, who inspire other artists, locking it all in a recursive cycle.

Justin: It is of course problematic as an artist to work within these structures. In my soundwalk for the Zuidas in Amsterdam, the narrator tells the listener that with every step, they (and I) are contributing to the legitimacy of the project developers. The balance between keeping a critical distance and "serving" public institutions is something to be aware of, sometimes it's very difficult to keep distance. Personally I'm very interested in public space, its constraints and dynamics, but I tend

to resist siting works there, especially as this usually involves a process of compromise. I'm not sure that any interesting art ever comes out of compromises. Occasionally it makes sense to turn to another medium or presentation form (writing for instance) to create this distance.

Matteo: Many of the seminal works of sound art which started this recursive cycle that David mentioned are now only accessible to us in printed publications. Most of the works that I have found inspiring for the development of my own practice, I actually never had the possibility of listening to in person. I only read about them in books. Do you think that this coincides with a turn towards academicism within the field?

Jeroen: Writing and publishing books is one of the few ways in which you can document sound installations or site-specific pieces, because often audio and visual recordings alone do not reflect the experience of the work itself in a satisfying way.

Matteo: We would not be writing this if we believed the contrary, but still, isn't it self-defeating to base one's aesthetic on the ephemeral nature of sound and then to spend all this energy to try to fix it on a long lasting medium?

Lars: No, not at all. The short life of a music piece has a long life in our memory. While we experience the work we mainly perceive the direct effect, there is no time for thinking about the deeper philosophical or conceptual aspects of the work. Only by taking this detour and reflecting on the works the indirect layers reveals themselves. This has an influence on our memory of the ephemeral work but it also has an influence on our direct perception of the work if we would later once again experience it. It would be interesting to try to remake the Eavesdropping event to see how or if it would be experienced differently next time. I by the way don't think this kind of academism is any new. Who would not increase their fascination of Bach's music, digging in to his hidden codes and structures?

Justin: I agree, the spread of printed publications comes partly from a growth in academicism but, also, as you both mention, the "need" for written documentation is maybe inherent in the ephemeral nature of sound. I became interested in sound art from seeing grainy black and white photos of installations (where there really wasn't much to see) next to reviews in art magazines (from the 70's and 80's) - In fact it was good for me - I was forced to use my imagination! I remember re-enacting some of Lucier's pieces with friends because it was otherwise impossible to know how it would have sounded. I'm not sure that video or cd documentation has made this any better. So much sound art is spatial, experiential and sensual.

David: I don't think it's a problem, as long as we realize that documentation isn't an attempt to "fix" things onto a medium, but a contemplation of the object through that medium; like a painting of a sculpture or a photograph of a ballet.

Matteo (looking at Lars): You built an instrument which plays when nobody is around to hear it, a bit like a shy music student that is afraid others will hear the mistakes he makes during practice. Does this connect to the fact that sound installations are kind of an ideal form of expression for musicians suffering from performance anxiety?

Lars: That is an interesting interpretation, I also liked your suggestion that the house with the placement of the installation in the basement could depict an inverted church tower with satanic church bells that would only play in the darkness. Both interpretations were not intended.

Matteo (looking at Anne): In your work you collapsed the idea of a private space from a room to a series of smaller containers. Your room had a collection of pots and vases from which barely audible recordings of traditional Congolese music emerged...

Anne: The room was a layered space for the different owners and visitors of the house: for the ghosts and for the guests. A detail of the piece were the slippers left behind at the entrance to a cabinet suggesting that one of the (former or current) inhabitants might have 'just left the room' entering another world through that door. I decided to eavesdrop back and forward in time and to create a space for the leftover ghosts and spirits of the building to gather and collect themselves, to celebrate and cry together, to find back each other and move on. Since I wanted to provide the ghosts with enough hiding space to disappear into when disturbed by nosy visitors I brought vases, magic tea pots, three suitcases and a trunk into the room in the attic. For the visitors on the other hand I furnished the room with things to discover about and from the Congo, if only they looked around carefully enough and opened up their ears wide...

Biographies

Acid Police Noise Ensemble is a collective of composers, artists, and performers based in The Hague. Their activities come from a mix of composition, performance art and improvisation. Since 2010 they have been performing increasingly theatrical and ambitious projects throughout the Netherlands. These have included the hour-long *One-Act Aktionist Chamber Opera Potlatch* and the three-hour *Stockhausen Serves Terrorism: 10 Years Of Sodom And Gomorrah*.

BMB con. was founded by Justin Bennett, Roelf Toxopeus and Wikke 't Hooft in 1989. Since 2006 BMB con. consists of a core duo working together with a changing group of invited artists / performers. BMB con. incorporate electronic and acoustic music, film, video and physical theatre in their performances and installations. As well as these fleeting, sometimes unique actions, BMB con. make and publish audio CD's, videos and photography.

Wen Chin Fu is an artist and performer currently living and working in The Hague, where she graduated from the ArtScience department of the Royal Academy of Art. She has collaborated with, among others, the choreographer Kirstie Simpson, photographer Maria Rebecca Ballestra and various theater groups in Holland. Her research is concentrated principally on the relationship between sound, music and physical movement.

Lars Kynde is a composer and sound artist, educated at The Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen and at the ArtScience interfaculty in the Hague. He performs and builds mechanical instruments and composition machines. These works focus on the interdependency of composition, instrument and notational system.

Jeroen Uyttendaele studied Radio at RITS in Brussels and Artscience at The Royal Conservatory of The Hague. A central theme in his work is the tangibility and visualisation of primal technological principals within a musical framework. This translates itself through the development of audiovisual instruments, installations and sound compositions.

Michele Spanghero is a sound and visual artist. His area of work spans between improvised electro-acoustic music to sound-art and photography. He has exhibited and performed in different international contexts in Italy, France, Switzerland, Slovenia, Austria, Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and USA.

Anne Wellmer is a composer, performer and sound artist based in The Hague. Wellmer uses field recordings, live sound processing and electronically generated sound in her work, which shifts between tape music, improvisation, installation and performance. Feedback, electromagnetic disturbances and barely audible acoustic phenomena make out essential aspects of her work. In 2007 she received an honoray mention in digital musics from the Prix Ars Electronica in Linz.

Matteo Marangoni is an artist and curator based in The Hague who is interested in aural perception, interactivity and self made media. He studied Arts Management at the University of Florence and received his masters diploma from the ArtScience interfaculty in The Hague. He is a founding member of the artist collective SoundKino and is a regular contributor to Neural magazine.

Villakabila is an Art collective and the base of a group of artists and musicians in Scheveningen, The Hague. Since October 2010 the former embassy of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is used as living space, ateliers, music studios and exhibition place.

Colophon

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