Avant-Guardian

Interviewed by Niels Latomme
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Jason Kahn And Christian Wolfarth: "An Instrument Isn't Really That Important For The Music"

Niels Latomme: Once I interviewed the saxophone player Johns Lunds, and he told me his approach to collaboration is actually about confrontation, not about finding each other in playing. Does this count for your approach when you work together as well?

Jason Kahn: No, I don't agree. I don't feel Christian's approach is academic. His background, as I understand it, has probably more influence from jazz than anything else. In terms of something being 'abstract', both voice (and guitar in my case) as well as percussion are working in an abstract way. We're not communicating something concrete like a certain rhythm or melody. This music is by nature abstract.

I think the tension implicit in this duo stems from the musical dialog and not the juxtaposition of the different instruments. I actually don't feel like an instrument is that important for the music. What makes a difference for me is the person behind the instrument. In my case, this means I could play drums or guitar or electronics and it would still be me. I just happen to think that in the duo with Christian that the voice and percussion are a good combination. Christian had the idea later on to add the guitar.

Niels Latomme: And is this tension the starting point for working together?

Jason Kahn: No, in my opinion the starting point for working together is a kind of shared set of ideas on how to collaborate and a personal rapport.

Niels Latomme: In the reviews and the texts about your collaborative record this description strikes me: 'Though both musicians use acoustic sound sources, together their music might seem electronic.' Are you interested in the disconnection between the sound and the source, or in your case between the live performance and the recorded result? Are you interested in blurring or exploring the borders between natural, or acoustic sounds and artificial, or electronic sounds?

Jason Kahn: I'm not trying to achieve anything with the music. It's so abstract that it can have no protocol or reason to be. It just is.

Niels Latomme: Christian, your work is pretty much focused on one instrument, while Jason's work explores almost all sorts of instruments — voice, electronics, guitar, drums.

Christian Wolfarth: Yes, that's true. I still have the feeling that my instruments, cymbals and drums, are not really explored for me. So, I don't feel the need to change to something else at the moment.

Niels Latomme: What do you think about the idea that your music is real, and not so much part

of reality — reality as a social construct, a context of a shared field of meaning; while the real is what is? Your music is, brutal and vital; and less a commodity

Jason Kahn: I think when you start using terms like real or reality you almost can't go any further. These words are way too vast to be thought of in anything but a very unlimited way. We would have to have a very long discussion about what real or reality is to even start to think about answering this question.

In terms of a Marxist context, with commodity, etc, the only way my music could not be a commodity is if I didn't earn or expect to earn any money from it. But because I get paid for concerts and recordings my music is de facto a commodity. The only way I could escape this would be to play on the street without asking for any money. Or just playing in the forest.

Niels Latomme: I always like to listen to non-musical sounds, and take a position as listener — i.e. accepting non-musical sounds that accidently happen as music. For instance, I live in an apartment with a courtyard, and I like to sit down and listen to the sounds of my neighbors and the machines like it's an ever-continuous field recording. Thinking about this, I realized lately it has some sort of political position in it as well: instead of limiting music to conventions (reality) — like records, songs, the context of a band, or a concert — I accept every sound as music (the real), and in this act, I question the socially prepositions of music as social constructs, determined by structures (that are always part of the powers that be). You music seems to be also open for questioning these constructs. Are you occupied by the political aspect of it?

Jason Kahn: I don't think in terms of musical vs. non-musical sounds. For me, as soon as we perceive a sound as musical (meaning: it is music for us) then the sound is musical. And I perceive all sounds as musical, whether from a musical instrument or the wind blowing through some trees.

My political considerations have less to do with music specifically than with the notions of listening, both as a singular listener and in a shared space, whether that be in the context of concert or walking down the street with many other people.

Niels Latomme: Maybe a question where I will play the devil's advocate: in Jason's texts the notion of space is quite accentuated. But when I read it, I was thinking what does a piece of text like I use the voice to activate the concert hall, probing both room acoustics and the social space between myself and the audience actually mean? It seems to me that anyone that sends a sound through a space always activates that space; anyone who performs on stage probes a social space between him or herself and the audience… Aren't you afraid that in describing you music undermines the power of it, because it's so broad and general?

Jason Kahn: I would definitely agree. Anyone can activate a space. You don't even have to use your voice for this. Just being aware of a space and one's place in it activates that space. And by space, I don't necessarily mean an acoustical or physical space. This could also be something like the space of social interaction, the space of dissent, the space of resistance, and during a concert both the performer and the audience simultaneously activate the space of listening with their energy and focus on the moment. This is one of the things which still interest me as a performer.