THE DANGER IS THAT YOU BECOME TOO ILLUSTRATIVE

Interview with Frank Bretschneider
ARIE ALTENA

Frank Bretschneider has been exploring the possibilities of an exchange between music and visuals since the 1980s. Together with Olaf Bender he founded the record label Rastermusic, which merged in 1999 with Carsten Nicolai's Noton to form raster-noton. In the summer of 2007 he performed his new piece *Rhythm EXP* in a 5.1-surround loudspeaker set-up at Amsterdam's 5DaysOff Festival. For this interview, we asked him a few question about the fusion of visuals and music.

AA Can you explain your work *Rhythm EXP*?

FB *Rhythm EXP* consists of very short pieces, with a change nearly every minute. I go into a rhythm, stop it, cut it, introduce something completely new and switch to another rhythm. Nothing is improvised, each drum-note and every change is composed. The sounds I use are not synthesized sounds, but rather rough and raw sounds, like pure electrical current. I try to use these abstract, non-musical sounds to produce music. Most of the material was actually composed for my latest album *Rhythm*, a fairly straightforward record. During the production, I had the idea to construct a more experimental piece from all the unsuitable tracks I had to kick out to keep the album straight. *Rhythm EXP* is somehow the counterpoint to the regular album. I developed a special 5.1-sur-

round version to perform at galleries, theaters or cinemas and I present it together with real-time generated visuals that fit the music. To create the image patterns I use Modul8, actually a VJ-software with some generators, using which you can create quite fascinating patterns. With the interaction between visuals and sound, the whole reaches another dimension, and at its best moments the audience really dives into it.

Was that a reason to start using visuals?

The dream to make music visible is already quite old. For instance it goes back to the paintings of Kandinsky and the light organs from the early twentieth century. With television we have the fast-cutting stuff, primarily derived from the video-clips on MTV, which also creates a direct relation between sound and image. I do not think it is really necessary to have music with visuals. But it is great especially for live, and after performing a lot, I recognized that the audience wants to see something more than just a guy sitting behind a laptop. I always had a strong interest in the interchange between visual art and music. And its a nice side effect that the visuals can work as an entrance for those who might find the music too abstract.

A lot of artists from raster-noton were already active
with visuals before the live cinema scene took off.

I did comparable things with 16mm and 8mm in the eighties. Around 1998 we started doing the Signal performances with Rastermusic, at that time the visuals were not yet synchronized with the sound. We used pre-recorded material, which we adjusted a bit to the music. Afterwards we began to try out all different kinds of software to synchronize visuals and music.

That was the period when a lot of people used
NATO?

I never used that. I used to work with software like Videodelic, Rhythmic Cycle or Onadime Composer. It all ran on OS9, which is why I had a Mac running OS9 for a long time.

You compose the music first, and then add the
visuals?

In the first instance I see myself as a musician. So yes, music comes first. But I also have movie material that I compose sound for.

The way in which you work with images seems
to be closely connected with how you distribute
sounds in space and over time. Is that a reason
why you use abstract images?

It comes from a fascination for mathematics and physics. For me it doesn't make sense to have a picture on the screen, like a human face, a landscape or a flower. They always transport a cliché, a commonplace. I don't want to tell a story. I prefer to keep the whole thing open, so you can fill it in as a listener. And since the music is quite abstract, I want to have the visuals the same way. At raster-noton we are very influenced by the manner in which music is represented in all these software used in the studio. You have all these dots going up and down, moving bars, LED-lines flashing. Sitting in a studio in front of all these interfaces is like sitting in a cockpit of a space ship. That is another fascination.

You mentioned that the audience 'dives into the
visuals'. Do you also aim to given them a feeling
that they are enveloped by music and sound?

I rather like to create a kind of slipstream to take the audience with. Yet I do not want to go too far in really capturing the audience. I feel that might be to overdo it. When I get the chance to work with a 360-degree screen, I would surely use it, just as with the 5.1 surround set-up. I have worked a few times now with a 5.1 multichannel system, and I must say I am a bit skeptical about it. You have to really figure out the system, prepare your work for the specific system, time everything very precisely. It is really nice to work with, but I really feel stereo is sufficient in most situations. The audience hardly ever sits or stands at the hot spot in the middle where you can experience a work for 5.1 in the 'right' way. People walk around or stand at the side and miss part of the experience. For music DVDs, the 5.1 system could really work, if you have the right set-up at home or headphones that can take multichannel sound.

These are all developments in technology that
seem to lead towards a more cinematic effect
in music. Although as you say, maybe stereo is
enough?

For a new multichannel soundsystem to succeed, it should be the kind of revolution that stereo was for mono. I do not think 5.1 is such a revolution, the quality of the sound is quite poor, the compression algorithms that you have to use are not really good. Maybe another technology with four speakers will work better.

Our listening behavior is changing as well. We
listen to a lot of music in mp3-format through

tiny earphones, in less-than-ideal circumstances. Maybe we are moving to a point where people might want to pay a few euros to listen to music from loudspeakers in a really perfect situation?

It depends on how interested people are in listening to the music. For many people music is just an environment that they carry around with them. This has increased with the downloading of music and all the mp3-players. But there will always be people who are really interested in a good listening situation.

For Sonic Acts we often refer back to experimental cinema and the early history of cinema to get to grips with what is going on in the live cinema scene. It is interesting that you rather mention MTV.

For me MTV was a really important influence. I was born in East Germany and I discovered MTV during the late eighties when all these digital technologies came up. Morphing was just new and a lot of other computer technologies. For me it was really surprising and more thrilling than Ruttmann or Fischinger, for example. But since many years I do not have a TV anymore, I don't know what is going on at television right now.

Could you describe your composition method?

Just like many others I worked with loops for a long time, loops, fades, transitions, mutes. Its easy and effective. I did get tired of that, and subsequently started working on the compositional structure instead. I did that by just improvising and trying out combinations, but I have grown better at combining sounds, so I do not have to 'waste' too much time anymore on experimenting while playing. I work more with cuts, sudden changes, dead notes, odd bars. Actually traditional composing techniques. The use of space, there are stretches where nothing happens, which are just there to build up the tension.
    The visuals are mainly driven by intensity and frequency range of the music. They already move in synchronization with the music, but I have a lot of MIDI-programming going to make the synchronization more precise. You could say programming MIDI is the composing part for the visuals. The MIDI goes to the visuals and the other way around as well. I combine different parameters, and use different slots to overlay different shapes and patterns.

So composing is making a choice of what musical parameters connect to what visual parameters?

Yes. You always have to make sure that both media are equally present, and that the relation between them does not become too obvious. It makes no sense to visualize every single sound, that would be too much and the whole thing will lose its tension. The danger is that you become too illustrative. You can also show too much of what is actually going on, but that you cannot really hear.

The audience will always try to figure out what sound is connected to what line or what shape. I have once made the error of showing everything that was going on at once. Each time, you learn by doing.

Frank Bretschneider works as a musician, composer and video artist in Berlin. His work is known for precise sound placement, complex, interwoven rhythm structures and its minimal, flowing approach. Described as 'abstract analogue pointilism', 'ambience for spaceports' or 'hypnotic echochamber pulsebeat', Bretschneider's subtle and detailed music is echoed by his visuals: perfect translated realizations of the qualities found in music within visual phenomena.

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