

MusikTexte Questionnaire
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On the multidimensional

Two years ago, I wrote in an essay entitled “Composing Today, Luft von diesem Planeten”¹: *As an artist I want to be involved in a personal, straightforward, critical and complex confrontation [with this world], in the most communicative way possible.*

Though I still fully stand behind these words, the word “complex” seems to be more important to me today than it was two years ago. With “complexity,” I’m not (merely) referring to musical material or its crafted elaboration, but rather to the complex, rhizomatic *network of relationships* that I want there to exist between and within all the different layers or dimensions that constitute a composition (the conceptual, the philosophical, the social, the performative, the scenographical, the sonic, the musical material and structure ...). When these layers really talk to each other, when they spark each other, they can miraculously create a kind of chemical reaction that makes the music come to life, hopefully even beyond the confined walls of the concert hall. But just like in real chemical reactions, one needs enough elements and forces to yield interesting end results. And one needs catalysts.

In the music I have written in the past ten years these catalysts have almost never been sonic by nature, but were rather a word, a technology, a social event, a concept, a situation, a mental or concrete image. These then trigger complex interactions with the other dimensions, such as the technological setup, the musical material, the compositional structure and the performative aspects.

In *Infiltrationen* (2009) for four electric guitars and live electronics, for example, the catalyst was the Jacques Tati-esque image of people in a typical office-like working situation, being enslaved by their computers - a (unidimensional) metaphor for how technology has infiltrated so much of what we do as human beings today. The electric guitars are lying flat on the table when being manipulated, joined by a battery of effect pedals, while the scores are generated in real-time and appear on individual computers, standing in front of the performers and communicating to each other via an Ethernet network. This “score” consists of verbal or symbolic playing instructions that can be categorized in four different groups: playing instructions (regulating how performers need to relate to each other), object usage (defining specific objects to use to manipulate the electric guitars) and short-term or long-term memory manipulations (forcing the performer to try to “think” like a computer). The performers never know exactly which instructions they will have to interpret, nor when, though the overall structure of the “score” is always the same. However, they can decide themselves when they want to move to the next instruction within the finite sequence in which the composition is laid out. Whenever one performer triggers a new instruction on his own screen, all the other computers are also generating a new

¹ Originally published in Dutch in “Klangforum Agenda,” 2013. English version published in *Darmstädter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik*, volume 22 (pp. 85-89), Schott Music, 2014.

instruction (via the network). The performers therefore constantly need to focus their attention on the computer screens, while at the same time processing and evaluating what is happening musically, so that they can find a way to move musically in this ever-changing labyrinth, and decide when to go to a new instruction. The relationship between performer and mediating technologies (network, computer, electric guitar) is thus much more complicated than it might seem at first glance.

The idea of technological infiltration is also taken further in the musical material and the compositional structure itself. Whenever a guitarist is not playing, even for the shortest amount of time, this 'gap' is automatically detected by another computer, and 'filled' by electronic sounds generated in real-time, created by a fifth musician. Finally, one more step is added to this cascade of infiltrations: when neither an electric guitarist nor the live electronics performer plays, prerecorded sounds—created via 'no-input mixing' techniques (which are nothing more than a network of analog electronic infiltrations)—are interjected into these holes.

These are just a few examples that should show that there is an intricate network of relationships operating between different dimensions of the composition, such as the conceptual, the concrete musical material and the performance. It should also be apparent how crucial the role of the performer is. He or she is not only making this composition lively in a very personal way, through controlled improvisations,² but he or she is also its subject.

This is taken even further in *PARK*⁴ (2012), a collaboration between dancer and choreographer Shila Anaraki, the electric guitar quartet Zwerm and myself. In this hybrid between music theatre, performance art and concert piece (labeling it would only limit it), the ideas presented in *Infiltrationen* were expanded by Anaraki into a more hybrid performative space, where all the performers, myself included, were also activated as dancers and actors, as *multidimensional bodies* that are trying to deal with the technological context in which they exist in a myriad of different ways.⁵

Similar multilayering strategies can be found in many (if not all) of my other compositions, though the relative weight of the individual layers differs in each of them. In *Generation Kill*⁶ (2012) for example (a trans-medial composition for eight musicians, four of which operate game controllers, live video and live electronics), the conceptual and referential layers take on a more prominent role, while in

² Through these improvisations, the underlying complexity of the interactions between the individual and its cultural and social context is also activated.

⁴ Developed for and premiered at the *Darmstädter Ferienkurse 2012*. A video registration of this performance can be found online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_-BrlD7Wyg (accessed 17/3/2015)

⁵ This "theme" has already been running through my work like Ariadne's thread for a long time and has only become more important in the past years. It also points towards the crucial importance of the physical performer and more in general of *physicality* in my work.

⁶ Written for and premiered by *Nadar Ensemble* at the *Donaueschinger Musiktage*, October 2012. A video registration of this composition performed at the Ultima Festival Oslo can be found online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0zAplC4pk8> (accessed 17/3/2015)

compositions like *I'm your body*⁷ (2013-14) and the cycle *Flesh+Prosthesis*⁸ (2013-14), for different sized ensembles and soundtracks, the focus lies more on how musical material can structurally reflect the multidimensionality of the composition.

That the relative importance of different layers or dimensions in my music fluctuates between different compositions is no coincidence, it mirrors how my perception of, position in and relation to the world changes over time, through and together with my art. It mirrors my desire as an artist to change perspective, to zoom in or out, halt on a detail that has been out of reach before. Or trade my metaphorical camera for a piece of paper and a chunk of charcoal. Or perhaps even a field recorder.

What remains a constant, though, is the aim to create some kind of *short circuit* through the interaction between all the layers present in my work, in a way that neither of these layers could achieve by itself.

How to label this way of working? I'm not a big fan of labeling and branding. Certainly not in the arts. Whether a label says "new complexity," "saturationism", "structuralism" or "new conceptualism" (to name just a few labels that are currently circulating in the small world of contemporary music): in their act of defining, they confine and restrict, they ultimately close off roads instead of opening up unknown territory. My work as an artist, on the other hand, is in constant flux and evolution, just like my life and the world I inhabit. In every new piece of art I make, I try to probe where I stand in that flux, what there is to uncover and open up in that moment in space and time, what I want to say about it, how I want to relate to it. Genres, brands or labels (including those applied to *my* work by *other* people), and all their implied expectations and connotations are of no use to me in that ever-changing process. Rather, on the contrary.

⁷ Written for and premiered by *Klangforum Wien* (cond. Emilio Pomarico) at the *Wittener Tage für Neue Kammermusik*, May 2014. A recording of the premiere can be found online: <https://soundcloud.com/stefan-prins/imyourbody> (accessed 17/3/2015)

⁸ Currently consisting of #0-2 for saxophone, electric guitar, piano, percussion and soundtrack, written for and premiered by *Nikel Ensemble*, at the Darmstädter Ferienkurse 2014 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsbFjQsmU7A>, accessed 17/3/2015) and #3 (*Mirror Box*) (<http://www.soundcloud.com/stefan-prins/mirrorbox-fleshprosthesis3-accanto-eclat>, accessed 17/3/2015), written for and premiered by *Trio Accanto* (for saxophone, piano, percussion and soundtrack) at *Eclat*, February 2015.