

# electro scene

a cartography of the links between images and sounds in the contemporary electronic scene

a book edited by roberto paci dalò & enrico pitozzi

## Questions for Kurt Hentschlagel,

1)- In this moment on the electronic scene, according to me, there are two tendencies: an *internal organic line* in which the materials are organized in order to outline a narrative fabric; on the other hand, an *external organic line* in which the materials operate towards abstraction. Nevertheless, the two layers above mentioned (the sound and the visual) are not opposed to each other, but they're both inscribed in a system of shades. Could you speak about this tension on narrative/abstractive dimension in your work?

I think there is no conclusive way to escape narration. So called abstract work I'd argue, does create at least one story, that of "abstraction". As long as we are talking about humans consuming an abstract work, their personal interpretation will likely create a narrative. We can not but read a story into anything, because our brain will always try to make sense of two events that occur together or follow each other. Even if they are entirely unrelated, but just randomly coincide in time and space, we'll initially connect them, assuming a relation. Then after some quick processing, deciding that they are unrelated, we'll filter them out as a non story, which is yet again a story. Our cognitive system is trained, for the sake of survival, to interpret and create meaning of everything we perceive. "Story making" seems to be one of our primal routines. We must understand and make sense of the environment in order to survive. When something happens that appears alien to us, our brain goes in a frenzy trying to find out what it is, whether it could be dangerous or indeed is benign? One exception probably would be meditation, wherein one tries to quiet one's mind and be still, subsequently, for as long as this stillness lasts, the creation of a narrative is halted.

So acknowledging that any expression results in a narrative, I (try to) ignore the distinction between abstract and narrative. Often what seems to appear as abstraction in my work mostly is the result of a manipulation of time, an imposed change of "standard" time, e.g. material being either slowed down, sped up, resynthesized etc. Attempting to transcend our "natural" sense of continuity so to speak.

I embrace the idea of a tension between a narrative and what I call a void. The void describing an at least temporarily static and immovable space, or moment, from which eventually, when hope for change has been all but erased, things do move on. My recent work is again situated in that inbetween field, where things happen within a frame of possible actions and intensities, without predictable overall structure and duration. Self regulating systems rather than fully articulated, linear compositions. At this point I habitually refer to the idea of weather, which comes and goes in ever different

combinations of a very few “ingredients”. It changes over time, sometimes rapidly, sometimes glacially, but constantly in flux.

Finally, as to the combined 2 layers of sound and visuals, composing with both in parallel, so that one reflects the other, this is probably my artistic signature. I started working in that manner in my solo video work in the late eighties and expanded on it during my collaboration with Ulf Langheinrich as “Granular-Synthesis” in the nineties and the beginning of this century. My aesthetic conclusion of that period and years of producing tightly sync’d audiovisual work is that a literal synchronization between sound and video is not necessarily the most desirable, but that a tight syn-esthetic relation is just another, albeit powerful, aesthetic possibility. To have sound and video go in and out of “mirror sync”, and at times not to be technically syncing at all, I find almost more interesting today. And of course, to refer once more to our perception apparatus, if we are served with an audiovisual artwork, whether sound and image in it are literally sync’d or not, we will in any case perceive it as one coherent piece.

2)- In your performances, *Karma* (2004), *Feed* (2005) and *Zee* (2008) for example, I think that there is a tension that connects the image to the sound, a form of "counterpoint" where the sound organizes the "atmosphere" that sustains the vision of the image. This modality is also in relationship with the colours – white, blue and red for example – and stroboscopic light. These characteristics change a perception of the audience. Could you speak about a relation, in your installation or performance, between colours and sound (if you want, you can speak about your work with *Granular Synthesis Pool* or *360°* for example)?

The audiovisual frame-work of all the 4 works you mentioned are actually quite diverse and make for good examples of what I just laid out before in regards to synchronicity. Let me run through the conceptual differences before responding to the relation between sound and color.

- In KARMA all sounds are synthesized as a result of the motions of the individual bodies / figures. Each body controls one (software) instrument; individual bodies are tuned to each other in microtonal steps, all together form a dynamically changing drone like sound-scape. By changing over time a few basic parameters like “attack” and “release” envelope- and global effect values, the relationship between sound and image becomes more or less apparent.

- In FEED, during its first cinematic part, which also employs the Karma engine, same principle, plus I use additional audio sources, mostly samples and recordings to accentuate both the very low and high frequency ranges. During the second, “strobed fog” part, I pickup the strobe flash frequencies (with solar panel > voltage pickups), creating a literal connection to the lights, but by feeding them into effects and feedback units, gaining a wide possible range of sonic expression from percussive to atmospheric.

- In ZEE finally I decided to let go entirely of any direct translation between sound and lights / image. ZEE’s quite minimal sound scape is only in the loosest of ways “connected” to the light changes. It actually is a quite interesting example of what works as a relation and what doesn’t. Here, as in the 2<sup>nd</sup> part of FEED, the visual impression is so immersive and 3 dimensional, that in a “reversal of fortune” the sound now appears directed and localizable, much less omni-present than the visuals and thus disengaged. I recently sat down with my good friend and composer Bruce Odland, who made a few masterly suggestions as how to create an omni sound diffusion for ZEE, wherein sound relates to the

visual impression in an equally high resolution, non localizable manner, sync'ed spatially so to speak, rather than by content or time base.

The sound scape of ZEE, just to give a brief description is based on 2 main elements, sine wave- and noise generators, 4 of each, with fixed frequencies, sculpted through micro phasing and animation of their surround panorama positions. These are supplemented (as always) by pulsing sub bass and 2 ambient, hovering harmonic fields.

- Finally POL, the Granular-Synthesis live-video piece, from 1998, which Ulf and I restored in 2008 and now exists in form of a final fixed sequence with 4 channel video and 12 channel audio. POL was composed and performed with audiovisual samples accessed in realtime from an AV sampling software called "varp9", that we developed ourselves, a midi controlled mono visual/audio sampler. These samples were AV clips of a dedicated recording session we setup with singer, performer Diamanda Galas, which were then processed quite extremely applying multiple audiovisual effects. While that material had a natural synchronicity between image - Diamanda's face and body, and sound - Diamanda's voice, we additionally created abstract AV samples, mostly color gradients, patterns and textures, for which we designed, or better invented, sound to go with.

To sum up, looking back at all these works, the way sound and image correspond within them is quite diverse. In response to your question, I'd say that both sound and visuals could be described as atmospheric, as a dynamic mass, rather than a classically structured composition or adhering to a grid or rhythm. I am usually not concerned with translating color (frequency) into sound, or if so it happens intuitively, which really for the most part is how I am working - once I have decided on an overall concept. Looking at an audiovisual composition from the perspective of a sculptor, what becomes exciting is the metaphor of matter taking on a different gestalt under certain (environmental) conditions, as for instance water, which can be a liquid, a gas and a solid depending on pressure and temperature.

I am intrigued by the effects of flicker / stroboscopic light on our perception and psyche. The way flicker emphasizes the mechanics of our vision, while inducing a form of heightened state, all the way into hallucinations, I find extremely interesting. Flicker - an external visual rhythm / beat interacting with the brain's visual cortex refresh cycles resulting in visual interference patterns - and with some people in out of control resonance, that is just too interesting. There are obvious parallels to sound, specifically concerning interference phenomena, overtones and their psychological effects.

3)- It seems to be, in your work, the predominance of a "latency" of the sound. What emerges here is a subliminal dimension of sound organized by the intervention of the different frequencies in giving an almost *tactile* character to your sound. Could you talk about a *physical* dimension of a sound in your works?

It's true that I am attracted to the physical side of sound, the intersection of sound and matter, the resonant behaviour of sound in a given space and it's interacting with people's bodies. In that regard I often start by "amassing", stacking sounds, using redundant instances, to create drone structures, wherein the individual "threads" are discretely agitated and within a range are resonating with their neighbouring "threads". From the perspective of an audience, the overall impression of such sonic fabric changes throughout the given space, by moving around as much as through the changes in the composition over time. The sound of ZEE, see above, would be a good example.

At this point its hard not to refer to La Monte Young's and Miriam Zazeela's "Dream House", which had a substantial influence on my way of "seeing" sound. Perceiving it as much as a physical substance as well as synthesized interference impression in one's mind (like with flicker). It's a classic minimal / maximal situation, in which a minimal set of instructions creates a surprising abundance of information. I am drawn to it as I am to the desert and to noise music (not that my ears could endure more exposure...) Sound as a molecular mass, a body with shifting gravity, sound as a liquid floating through space, sound as particle clouds I can't ever tire off.

And finally, not to forget, the intensely physical frequencies below 50Hz, the land of sub bass "sculptures", where the immaterial becomes almost a material, and thus starts "colliding" with our bodies, an invisible yet tangible force field. The invasive, physically animating nature of infra bass, and I mean mostly as continuous sine waves, rather than as beats, turns air into an enveloping agitated substance, something in between a cushion and a full body vibrator. There is no better instrument than sub bass to radically reform the character of a given space. Sub bass frequencies modulate and color also quite dramatically other, higher frequencies, by the level of energy they carry, which increases the subs prominence throughout the spectrum.

4)- Could you speak about the relation, in your composition, between the concept of *form* and the conception of an audiovisual composition?

In terms of musical form, as a visually trained artist rather than as a composer, and as somebody who can neither read nor write a classic score, I think its accurate to say that I work in open form. At times I use classic structural elements, starting by developing modules, building phrases etc, in an additive manner if you will, but often I start from an amorphous position, in a subtractive way, like a sculptor and work myself into a material. I also combine both approaches.

SCAPE would be a good example for the hybrid method. It started from a piece of video I had recorded as a visual test. Part of it, while viewing the material, caught my attention and I extracted a 10 sec or so clip. I began by slowing it down by a factor of 1000 to a point where it practically turned into a sequence of still frames, albeit through frame blending still retaining a moving image character. The original sound of the material, in the process of the 1000x stretch, audibly all but vanished, in the process getting pitched down into oblivion. So I took it and ran it through several instances of pitch correction to bring it back up into an audible range, which at first, not surprisingly, gave birth to a plethora of aliasing artefacts. And unattractive ones for sure, actually it was mostly all aliasing noise. So next step, to "reconstitute" the material I applied sequential time based effects, delays and reverb, intuitively, no plan there, until it started sounding like both a far out noise-scape intersected in intervals by clusters of strings. If you would listen to the "original" slowed down and re-pitched sound and then to the processed sound, you could not make the connection. Anyway this now entirely "interpreted" new sound became the sonic foundation for SCAPE, which other than through volume changes I did not further tweak. On top of it and brought in during further editing of the video, I added a few pulse and beat formations, mostly as a counter point and deliberately meant to be out of touch with the rest of either sound or the visuals. If anything, this work is about unrelated elements relating to each other. What you hear is what u not see and vice the versa.

Most of my audiovisual work evolves by developing both sound and image in parallel, whether they are strictly sync'd or not, I pursue them together in one process. My focus intuitively wanders between

them during production, more so in the beginning, while towards the end of the process my attention becomes more equally distributed. It does depend still on the particular medium, for instance CLUSTER, which is based on new software I have been working on for the last 2 years, and is combining real-time 3D animation and audio, is by default rendering both image and sounds as a continued parallel stream. It's probably the most versatile AV instrument I have ever built, together with Rob Ramirez and Ian Brill, providing both intuitive control and audiovisual malleability.

6)- At different levels, in your composition process is a same “modulation time phenomena”. The sound or the form of time is pulsated, is fragmented; there is a superposition of a different sound's surfaces at varying speed (acceleration, loop). In other part of the work (or in others works, *Scape* (2009) for example) the sound is not pulsated, but is modulated, in perpetual movement as a wave, it's a “duration”. Therefore to think the sound as an aesthetic of the time, in which the time takes form, even if unstable... could you speak about your idea of the “time” in your audiovisual composition?

One of my favourite things to do is to halt synthesizing processes and listen to the resulting “end”, after conscious action has ceased and sound trails off, or, when in absence of envelopes sound stagnates. I started doing this with modular synthesizers and later with the Karma- and now Cluster engine, which will output sound as long as bodies are visible, whether they are moving or not. Stopping sound engines often results in static drones, drifting ever so slowly, or in perceivably so until you forget about them, attention wandering elsewhere... Eventually you reconnect, and by then the sound has transformed, or so it seems, but really one has moved on and so has the impression of sound.

Composing in such moments becomes more like abstract painting, about textures and layers and density. And like so many paintings about the idea of frozen time, a different perception of time, non-sequenced, non-linear time. Still find it remarkable, that electronic music, being based on circuits and science, fixed clocking really brought back the concept of cyclical time. Or better non-standard time. Of course there is all the beat based work also, but even that in its insistence to go on forever, without beginning and end, is all about the cycle, the variation within the cycle, the malleability of the cycle, with the only fixed element being the cycle itself. It's the post-industrial marriage of modern, segmented linearity with the ancient cyclical concept of time.

When trying to understand the visual phenomena created by stroboscopic light, I started reading about brain processes, mostly on how we perceive-, split up- and “digest” the world. One of the most interesting aspects I found was that every process in our brain works dynamically, so depending on urgency we can process in varying speeds. And discrete areas of the brain run on their own respective speeds, as needed. Speed ranges from very low sleep cycles to hyper speed survival modes, at several thousand refreshes per second. It means that our perception of time is in constant flux. While in waking, daily life we operate on a more standard “fluctuation”, try stepping in front of a car and, realizing your error in kinetic judgement, sharply withdrawing, all of a sudden finding yourself transported into an abundantly crisp slow motion universe. We are also able of wilfully adjusting our reception speed, using recreational drugs, meditation, by doing adrenaline loaded extreme sports etc. In summary, looking back at my working career, I think I have worked for most it creating “time pieces”, in the beginning of GS obsessing with acceleration while now decidedly succumbing to the glacial paces.

7)- The redefinition of the notions of the listen and vision in your works, brings me to speak of an immersion in the audiovisual environment. This immersion has a meditative character: the body is inside the audiovisual space. The body of whom listens he is crossed by the sound, one way to explore our loneliness ... Could you speak of this aspect about the strategies for a redefinition listen and vision?

Immersion, as an aesthetic concept, stands for offering an audience an experience, rather than a casual on looking or listening from a safe distance. Thus immersion suggests a heightened state, and asks for an involvement, wherein the visitor is becoming integral part of the environment, and thus the work is rendered complete only with- and in the experience of the visitor.

Consequently we are talking about an, at least initially, solitary moment, an existential yet sensual state. As we hear with our entire body, not just the ears, being surrounded by sound quickly takes on a quality of “being” it. Depending on whether the content resonates with us, as much as the sound waves, we might have either a joyous or annoying experience. The psychological effects of an immersive work become prominent as analytical perception is bypassed, or in better words is delayed to after one has left the “sphere”.

Its bit like encountering a monumental landscape, lets say standing at the rim of the Grand Canyon and gasping at the grandiosity of the scenery, the immense scale, feeling the rugged wind, being overwhelmed by the pure extravagance of it. The idea of the sublime comes to mind, something vastly beautiful but equally unsettling, making it hard to think clearly, coherently, as part of us just wants to keep feeding on it, while another tells us to get out of it before things get out of control.

The first time I went to the US west coast, San Francisco actually, to be part then of a series of exquisite “Recombinant” concerts (with GS) in both San Francisco and Los Angeles, organized and curated by Naut Humon, I took the opportunity to rent a car and head south to take a few days off in the desert. The owner of Asphodel records, wonderful Mitzi Johnson, handed me one of the best gifts I ever received, by booking me a hotel near Joshua Tree Park west of LA right at full moon, which I realized only after arriving there at night. After some recreational rest, I headed out a few miles with the car into the barren dark landscape, got out and started walking to stop shortly after in complete amazement. It hit me that there was no sound to be heard, other than my breathing and heart, while the entire immobile surrounding was bathed in the blue full moon light. There was complete, if not bizarre stillness, as if somebody had pulled a plug on a set but left the blue light on. It felt like being on Mars, in a surreal exhibition of sorts, with the most elaborate arrangement of rocks, cacti, insular small plants in infinite variation and layers. My urge was to keep walking and staring and soaking in that otherworldly landscape. My partner, who travelled with me, woke me up saying “What if there are big animals? - and I was back to reality.

8)- Could you speak about the ideas and conceptual lines for the realisation of *Cluster* (2010) and *Splendid void* (2010)?

CLUSTER is the next generation of my generative 3D and audio work, focusing on group behavior, - psychology and -interaction, particularly looking at swarm phenomena. A simple and absurd setting is proposed - 3D human characters behave much as a school of fish, in otherwise impossible physical conditions. In the weightless choreography of “Cluster” humans appear mostly as anonymous particles,

as a pulsing, amorphous mass, a cloud of blurry matter from body parts, light and sound. The audiovisual impression Cluster is rendering is fluctuating between realistic and abstract forms.

By its generative nature never fully predictable, CLUSTER describes a meta-organism with decidedly anti-individualistic character. While the 3D characters are of human form, their behavior is not, thus preventing a natural bonding of the audience with their presumed alter egos. Computed physics render the nature and patterns of events, within a scripted framework, wherein I channel and orchestrate the ensuing forces.

The work draws some of its ambiguity from both repetitive, rhythmical elements, as well as from “natural” improvised structures. The bulk of sounds in CLUSTER is rendered by the events driving the work - swarm motion, swarm interaction as well as changes in light. A rhythmical grid bonds the individual parts together, creating a vaguely looping, pulsing impression. Sub bass “floor”- and high frequency “ceiling” drones frame the otherwise generatively rendered event driven sounds. As for the sonic aesthetic of Cluster, the main inspiration I drew from were insect drones, overtone laden clouds, which I “retro” interpreted as a swarm of strings. There are currently 30 bodies and thus voices stacking up in Cluster, distinguished in microtonal steps, with change in sound occurring through body motion, -change in dynamics, -proximity to other bodies, -attraction and rejection etc. As with the visual play between realistic and abstract forms, the sound ranges from orchestral micro active hive like structures to meditatively hovering almost static planes.

As for SplendidVoid, it’s a work in preparation still, so I can’t yet talk about it.

9)- You have made a lot of collaborations. Could you speak of the ideas that have tied you and Ulf Langheinrich with Angelin Preljocaj (*N* – 2004) of the relationship, particularly, between the audiovisual composition and choreography?

There is not too much to say about “N”, which, while having been reasonably successful, did, in my opinion, not fulfil the expectations. Partially that was because Ulf and I were in the process of splitting up and decided to split work into visuals and sound, agreeing to not interfering with each other’s work. The actual process of working with Angelin, after much conceptual considerations leading up to it, was interestingly sparse, a process mostly of presenting modules to each other and somehow integrating them or not over time. It was without a question though a thrill taking part in the project and working with an outstanding choreographer like Angelin in quite luxurious production conditions.

“N” became the starting point for my post GS real-time 3D work and renewed interest in strobe- and light composition. The stage lighting concept I developed was based on 2 parameters, frequency and amplitude. The length of the piece went from almost entirely dark and a slow pulse to end in extremely bright and high frequency strobe light. Light was always in motion, pulsing, while increasing in frequency and also brightness, to eventually hit strobe mode, which occupied the last 20 minutes of the show in accelerating patterns, getting increasingly more intense and hard to look at. Not to mention the difficulty for the dancers to elaborately move on stage in such harshly sequenced light. I was not involved in the creation of the sound, so can’t talk about the making of it, probably the interesting aspect of “N” is that choreography, sound and visuals are only loosely connected to each other, at times adding up forcefully, at other times not corresponding much but rather existing as independent layers.