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"You Are Resonating with Ideas More than with Frequencies." : A Conversation on Performing Music in Digital and Hybrid Self-Organized Spaces

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FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

"YOU ARE RESONATING WITH IDEAS MORE THAN WITH FREQUENCIES." A CONVERSATION ON PERFORMING MUSIC IN DIGITAL AND HYBRID SELF-ORGANIZED SPACES

KRISTINA PIA HOFER ____ Tell me about your practice at echoraeume. What sort of space is it, and what has been happening there for the last couple of months?

CHRISTINE SCHÖRKHUBER ____ echoraeume is a virtual venue. It's not a service provider for general streaming – it's a community space that the contributing organizations generated together, to have their own independent streaming platform. It also contains a video chat, and a text chat system.

NOID ____ We started echoraeume right after the spring 2020 lockdown was announced. Christine's festival, Klangmanifeste,[1)] and an event of my der bloede dritte Mittwoch[2)] series had to be cancelled. Christine and I immediately agreed that we would not stop organizing events, but move them to the digital space. Everybody had this idea at that moment (laughs), but echoraeume was special since we wanted integrated chat rooms from the start, and we wanted to point out the precarious situation of performing spaces in Vienna, which had already been a problem before COVID-19. The idea was that we would create our virtual venue in the present situation, because this was the only option to organize any concerts at that time, but that we would move back into our real house, as soon as the situation would allow. Running echoraume during the lockdown was a statement saying: we *need* the space.

CS ____ When the COVID crisis forced everybody into virtual rooms, it was important to us to find an alternative to regular, proprietary streaming providers. We wanted this virtual room to be self-defined by artists, sound artists, and musicians. And it worked: at the moment there are about twenty organizers doing events at echoraeume, and it became a real option. The Viennese art newsletter eSeL called us "the new hotspot of the Viennese media scene,"[3)] and I think it's at least a bit true. People connect in a different way than they would have before.

KPH ____ How do you 'curate' the room? As an artist, what would I do if I wanted to play?

1) http://www.klangmanifeste.at/ (18 February 2021)

2) http://bloedermittwoch.klingt.org/ (18 February 2021)

3) "[…] de[r] neue[…] virtuelle[…] Inspot der Wiener Szene": https://esel.at/termin/105459/kaffee-adele (18 February 2021)

CS ____ You write us an email, and we decide as a team. Our decision is not curatorial in an artistic sense – we look at whether an artist's idea fits with the idea of the community-based project. The only proposals we have rejected so far were those of people looking us up like an enterprise, as a service provider, and expecting that we run everything. That's what we don't do.

KPH ____ Does the collective work for free?

N ____ We were lucky to get some funding at the start. We were supported by the MA7, the City of Vienna Municipal Department 7, in a very non-bureaucratic way. And we also got some money directly from mica Music Austria.[4)]

KPH ____ Was this money part of extra funding these organizations implemented because of COVID-19?

N ____ No. And it wasn't much, but it was enough to pay the technical team and the organizing team at least a little. Also, every participating organization that could afford it contributed a 'streaming fee.'

CS ____ These fees were voluntary solidarity contributions, and depended on the financial possibilities of each organization. For instance, der bloede dritte mittwoch and Klangmanifeste both paid €600 each. Others paid less, or more – mostly less, actually.

KPH ____ You are both musicians yourself. What do you think about the transmissibility of sounds through platforms like echoraeume? How is is different from playing in a physical space?

CS ____ You cannot compare them at all. Playing through a platform means a completely different idea of sound, it doesn't have anything to do with live music. So whenever you do something in the virtual room, you have to consider this. For me, playing at echoraeume as a performer was super nice, because I could let the audience watch me from above, and watch my hands while I was working. I really let people look over my shoulder, and I communicated from down there. Usually, in a live situation, that's not possible. Also, the virtual room lets you combine things that you otherwise wouldn't combine – you can work your show into a video art piece. And you can always play with situations typical for the Internet itself: latency, interruptions, breaks, and this really crazy

4) https://www.musicaustria.at/ (18 February 2021)

idea that you think you have a sound wave moving through the room, while actually it is moving through glass fiber. This opens extra realms.

KPH Did this also have an impact on the sounds you were producing?

CS Content-wise? Yes. I was working with computer-voice-triggered terms of use. I took the various terms-of-use agreements of social media providers, and let a computer voice read them out loud in various accents. Then I scattered them into fragments, used that as material for a beat sampler, and remixed the content. I wanted to make obvious the absurdity of these agreements, which we tend to accept quite easily. Before COVID-19, everybody who worked in the virtual room had the impression that they chose it deliberately. But during COVID, we were forced into it. I wanted this reflected in the pieces that I did for the virtual room.

KPH How is performing in the virtual for you, noid?

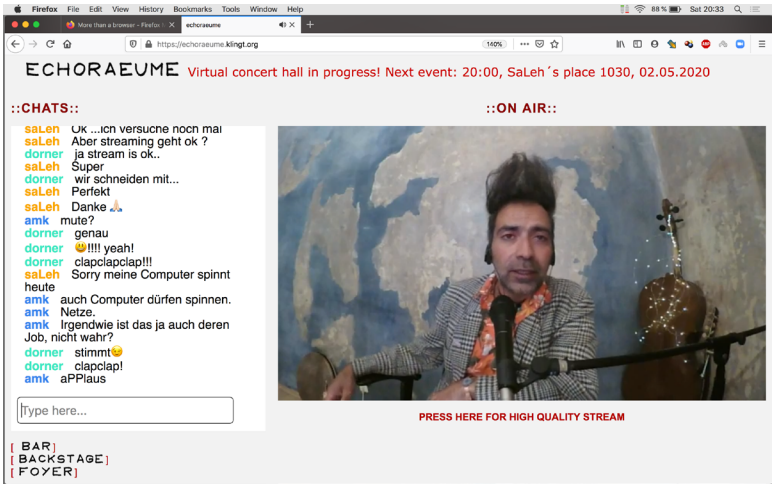
N To me, the visual component becomes more important. For the first broadcast, Klaus Filip and I performed *Sonic Luz*, a live sound performance in which we produce images through shadow play with our instruments. We use optical sound discs and lamps as an optosonic synthesizer – the shadow contains the sound information, but it also creates an image. It was a logical choice for the first broadcast.

KPH I have heard of artists who are afraid to do streams because they usually do not pay a lot of attention to what them performing looks like.

N You can just do what you always do, record it, and transmit – or you can do things differently. In the beginning, we had planned that at echoraeume everything should be happening live, but then, the question came up: what does 'performing live' actually mean in the virtual space? Some live setups can also be technically difficult to realize. We tried some very complicated things (laughs). For instance, when we moved back into the real space with der bloede dritte mittwoch as soon as the hard lockdown in spring 2020 ended, we had one show that happened in the virtual space – the performers were in New York and Barcelona. We wanted to broadcast this show live at echoraeume, and project it in the real

space venue at the same time. Things did not turn out exactly as planned (laughs). Microphones that were not supposed to be open were open, for instance. It's one thing to make a concert and have a stream. You have some image and some sound, and you send them out. But once you have a signal coming back, it gets really, really complex.

KPH ____ You said that at echoraeume, there is the possibility to participate for whoever is watching and listening. Did you, when performing, interact with those interactions? Or are the chat rooms meant for the audiences to interact among themselves?



// Figure 1
echoraeume live. Screen grab

CS ____ Audiences can feedback via text chat to the moderation of a show. In our show FS* About Feminisms, we were reacting to those feedbacks. When playing music though, I usually don't. It's technically possible, and some artists do. I find it difficult to focus on two things at the same time (laughs).

N ____ Another issue is latency, which you have on the stream, but not on the chat. There's a latency of anything between twenty seconds and one minute, which you have on all the commercial streaming platforms, too. And this is a real handicap for the live interaction. Even if you want to implement a simple interaction, like an applause function, the applause comes twenty seconds late. Which is an eternity. There are different ideas out too – Michael Aschauer, who is involved in the technical and artistic development of echoraeume, wants to try a stream that prioritizes the real time aspect over the quality/safety aspect. His idea is to send the stream directly via webRTC, an open source tool that allows direct, peer-to-peer communication in real time. The stream becomes something like a chat. Michael is working on performing with this idea, and has already experimented live with this setup at Ars Electronica 2020.[5)]

CS ____ Michael also programmed the video chat for our platform, the vroom.

5) https://ars.electronica.art/keplers-gardens/en/stwst48x6-more-less/ (18 February 2021)

KPH Do you know who listens to and watches your shows?

CS Partly, from feedback to the chats – the text chat was very active, especially at the beginning and during summer. The numbers we know from the statistics.

N And from the donations (laughs).

CS I want to add something on the issue of self-representation in the virtual room. At the end of the day, it's not new. I think the visual aspect of live performing came to us much earlier, before everyone was streaming. First, when you had a live performance, you had to take care of documentation for yourself. Second, you had to deal with the fact that probably, luckily or unluckily, some recording of your show would end up on the Internet anyway. When you play in 2020, you are never only live. You are always documented. You always refer to your own Instagram/Facebook figure.

KPH Unless you are super controlling.

CS You cannot control everything.

N Whether you're controlling or not: as a musician, it was always very clear to me that whenever I enter the stage – however 'the stage' is defined – I am a performer. And that I also produce a visual aspect. You cannot not perform. You can decide to do an "I'm not performing!"-performance, but that's it. I think that's a valid decision, and you can still do it on the stream, but there it gets a bit more difficult because you *know* there is a camera, and you *know* the camera has a frame, which has an inside and an outside, and you need to decide what goes in and what stays out.

CS Somehow, this gives you even more control. You are more aware, and can consciously decide how, or if, the audience sees you. I think it's nice to play live, but it's also a lot of stress, because people can watch you all the time.

N There was this fantastic interview I had with Taku Unami for one of our first shows at echoraeume. He was producing a video for der bloede dritte mittwoch, where he took a virtual tramway ride through Vienna from his room, via a Japanese TV station that broadcasts these rides nonstop. When we had our talk, he put his cell phone down on the table, and you could only see his head from

the forehead up – mostly his hair, sometimes the upper rim of his glasses. I couldn't tell if this framing was deliberately chosen, but it was a very strong decision, and a very strong image, to *not* show the face.

CS Mai Ling,[6] the contemporary Asian artist collective that had four or five broadcasts at echoraeume dealing with the anti-Asian racism that was flaring up during the spring 2020 lockdown, used a similar strategy. They are working with the group synonym "Mai Ling" and use it as a collective alias. When they perform, they hold a paper cutout depicting the face of "Mai Ling" in front of their faces. This would not be possible in a live performance.

KPH Do you store the echoraeume performance for audiences to access after the initial broadcast?

CS The organizations that program the shows, and make the recordings, sometimes also make them accessible on their own websites. Dorf TV[7] took over a lot of our shows, and many shows are now in their archive. We don't have our own archive at echoraeume yet, and we're still figuring out how to do it, or if we should do it at all.

N Clemens Hausch, the organizer of MOOZAK[8] and web designer for echoraeume, suggested doing an "Unübersicht"—

CS —literally, an "underview" instead of an "overview"! (laughs)

N For me, Clemens's idea works well, because it reflects the situation that we have in the virtual space: it's totally chaotic. Everything is archived, but it is not organized. You find new things as well as relics of early days, plus there's commercial pressure that pushes certain content to the front. It's very hard to get to the things you're actually interested in, when they are behind that layer of commercial information.

CS On the other hand, of course, there is the expectation of just finding the shows. Still, we don't want to just put up the shows in a regular way, like on YouTube. We're still discussing how to do it. It's not so easy, because you'd have to program it, and then it would be very close to an 'alternative YouTube' – and that's a

6) https://www.mai-ling.org/ (18 February 2021)

7) https://dorftv.at (18 February 2021)

8) http://moozak.org/ (18 February 2021)

challenge, especially financially. We couldn't do it with the little funding we get from the City of Vienna.

KPH My next question would be about listening. I guess you follow a lot of shows, both in real spaces and in virtual spaces. How would you describe your listening experiences in both contexts?

N I'm always very conscious of the resonances of a space. My main instrument is the cello, and for a string instrument, the space in which you play becomes part of it. In every real space, you have resonances that are defined by frequencies, and they define the reverb or bouncing effect you get. In the virtual space, there is an analogy to these resonances, but of course they are not physical. In a way, they are theoretical. Does that make sense? I mean, you are resonating with ideas, more than with frequencies. I think it's possible to play with them in a similar way, but of course you're changing the medium, from frequencies to ideas. For instance, I made a video for the Festival Jazz en Lima in Lima, Peru, where I used an old quarry as my stage, and wanted to work with the idea of distance. I played the cello, and my performance was filmed with cell phones, through binoculars, from a great distance. Sometimes I was also hiding behind bushes.

KPH These strategies of communicating 'distance' are all visual. Is it easier to play within the medium of ideas, as you call it, on the visual layer – or can such play also manifest in sound?

N I think for me it's mostly in the visual, though it would be very interesting to try and translate it to the sound layer. However, I'd say that the Internet is designed mainly as a visual medium, and that as an audience, we perceive it as such. Sound is neglected. The speakers of a laptop are usually not as good as its screen. Sound resolution is poor, the frequency range is poor. Also, skipping is easier through visual material. When you skip through sound, you lose all timing information.

CS I think the way that information is given through the Internet already says a lot about its perception. The Internet is about compression, so you generate most of the things you perceive in your own head. When you have mp3 compression, you add some of the sound psychoacoustically – we *know* that there is a bass coming in, even if we don't hear it; we can make a snare continue to play in our heads, even when it's not there anymore. When you have

pictures, you add most of them in your brain, because an H.264 compression actually just says: "Here are a lot of black pixels, and after two seconds, there will be a white pixel." This is the language that the Internet uses, and we are used to translating it.

When perceiving art in the Internet, we ourselves create while we are receiving – its aesthetics, its meaning, and its content. We are using codes, montage, and frames. A meme is an example of that: it extracts some crucial aspect of a certain situation and becomes a pointed visual comment referring to something else. But as soon as people refer to the meme, it gets a meaning of its own. It becomes the reference that summarizes a whole bunch of facts. Concepts in the www need a lot of round-up knowledge, connotations, and context to work, but they also need simple information units or symbols to carry the actual meaning. Social media communication, and actually all online information communication, uses a wide and fast variety of such little codes that shorten the information transfer process. In the last years, I think we were really ramping up in how fast we can connect pieces of information. Maybe the situation was similar with early cinema: suddenly, after a while, audiences understood that a cut could signify that a considerable amount of time has passed in the narrative. These are codes you have to learn. And after a while they seem natural to you.

N I think it's also interesting to talk about the code that's behind the web surface, HTML code. If you question the codes of communication in the virtual space, you cannot stop in front of the computer keyboard, you have to go inside the technological codes as well. In the 1990s, media art invested a lot in this discourse. We had telephone concerts, conference concerts, and they were conceptual and trial-and-error, because the technology did not work. You could do audio via the Internet, but up until the early 2000s, there were always problems. You could not just *use* the media, so we had media art that questioned the media. When the technology started to work, in 2005, in 2010, when you could do voice over IP, it became boring (laughs). Artists were stepping back, and the art discourse about those codes was less important for a while. Now, during a lockdown, we are in a really bad situation: all the technology that works smoothly is now proprietary, and we are giving away control of our communication. A lot of people say "Facebook is bad," but they still use it. Because it is a surrogate for public space.

CS However, to quote Clay Shirky: "Communications tools don't get socially interesting until they get technologically boring." [9)]

9)
Shirky, Clay (2008): Here Comes Everybody: How Change Happens When People Come Together. London: Penguin, 105.

In the 1990s, performing in the virtual space was interesting on an artistic level, as a technological phenomenon, but now it is interesting on a cultural anthropological level. But of course, we are still in the middle of this development. And like you, Kristina, said when inviting us to this interview: now is the time for collecting experiences, and analyze them later.

KPH One thing that immediately comes to mind – and I say this as a not very programming-savvy person – is that learning the codes behind the web surface takes labor and skill that is not equally distributed among performing artists and general audiences like me.

CS In our group, we use different programming languages, and some people are very skilled at them, while others are not. For me, code is the language that structures the art that I work with, so I'm always interested in how it works, even if I don't speak it. I am happy that there are other people in the group who speak these languages more fluently than I do. However, I think understanding code is not so different from understanding any other language that constructs reality. In the end, it is a way of communicating with a machine. It's an agreement.

N I think that even if you don't speak the language, it's important to understand that there *is* a language that you can learn. If you don't understand a cell phone, it's just a black box that you cannot look inside. But it makes a big difference if you know that inside is something that follows rules, and that they are simple rules you *can* learn to understand.

CS I also think that even if it doesn't work out in the end, it makes sense to try it yourself, just as a statement that you won't take what you are getting served, and to try to create your own structures (laughs). As an artist, you will never be able to do it better than an enterprise. You cannot write programs, construct systems, or built applications that surpass a heavily-tested product with a million-dollar budget and a lot of manpower behind it, on a functional level. But you can create something that is closer to your situation and your needs. Anyway, better functionality is not the point. The point is finding other ways of doing it.

KPH To wrap up, let's come back to the question of listening. In sound art studies, it is often suggested that sound, as an

invisible phenomenon, could possibly disturb or even disrupt the unequal power structures that visuality, as we know it, imposes upon most societies. Listening, presumably, can open up spaces for less hierarchical ways for humans to engage with each other. Without going into the details of the particular theories: how does this general suggestion resonate with you?

N Sound is always a sign of power. Church bells are a classic example. Historically, dominance was often stated by sound. But listening is another question.

CS It depends on what kind of 'listening' we are talking about. Comparing listening to information to listening in general is like comparing reading to watching a landscape. In social communications among humans, listening has this meta-meaning of being a focused, contemplative, not-sending-but-receiving act. This meaning also applies to experiences of listening to nature, landscape, environment. It does not apply to situations where you listen to gather concrete information. Even if these situations are connected to each other.

N I have a hard time seeing 'listening' as a totally equal or non-hierarchical thing, because listening means that someone has to shut up, so that someone else can produce sound. This is not a non-hierarchical situation – unless we all shut up, and no one decides that we do so (laughs). I mean, I like to shut up every once in a while; I like it when everyone shuts up. But the question remains – who decides? Another very basic thing is that if there is a crowd of people talking, when there is a whole room to listen to, we have filters that we unconsciously use. You can also consciously decide not to pay attention to a specific sound. The sound will still come into your ears, but you can just stop following the meaning, you can listen and at the same time not listen. So, I'd say that there are ways to create non-hierarchical listening situations, but it's not something inherent to the auditory sense.

KPH During the spring 2020 lockdown, on social media platforms, many musicians and performance artists I follow expressed their grief about not being able to play music for a live audience, to listen to music together in clubs, to gather in a physical space, and to speak to each other in physical presence. This concern also came up a lot among my community of university teachers when we had to move our classes online. Could it be that 'listening' – in the

sense of deeply engaging with each other, socially – benefits from such real space situations? And what's different when connecting through the Internet?

CS ____ Even when you go back to listening as a tool of communication, it's very difficult to translate it to the digital room. You don't catch every exhale, every nuance of the voice of who you're talking to. You don't get these little things, that nevertheless transport meaning, via digital communication. Some people fill this gap with other tools – for instance, they learn to communicate with stronger facial gestures. I think that over digital channels, the auditive sense is losing very much of supplementary information, and those gaps are filled with other things – concepts, visuals codes, messengers, emoticons. Emoticons are very important, they are visual icons filling in for the auditory affective expressions you don't hear in a voice over digital transmission.

KPH ____ Where are you going next with echoraeume?

CS ____ We will have some hybrid events, which will partly be streamed on the Net, and partly happen live in physical space.

N ____ The question of hybrid spaces will stay with us for a while. Even very prominently, I think. echoraeume started as virtual only, but now, it has become hybrid. And I think this is a field where a lot of work needs to be done. Technologically, artistically—

CS ____ —socially.

KPH ____ And theoretically, for me, so I will be getting back to you about this question, hopefully, over the course of the next couple of years.

CS ____ I think none of us actually really understands yet what's happening. We'll be around!

echoraeume can be followed online at:
https://echoraeume.klingt.org/

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// Image credits

Fig. 1: *echoraeume* live. Screen grab.

//About the Authors

noid /aka Arnold Haberl (b. 1970) studied cello and mathematics. He is teaching at the Multimedia Art department of the University for Applied Science in Salzburg. As a composer, sound-artist, cello player, and improvisor, he understands his work as fundamental research, leading to a wide range of contradictory outcomes. He is part of the organizing team of the monthly concert series der bloede dritte mittwoch and the community based streaming platform echoraeume.klingt.org. He also curated an annual sound art exhibition in Nickelsdorf. http://noid.klingt.org

Christine Schörkhuber is a freelance sound and media artist, video maker, and musician based in Vienna. She is interested in close listening, in the intersections of audio and visual arts, and in the dynamic relations between sociopolitical and technological systems and the individual. As a solo musician, she performs under the name Canned Fit. As curator and organizer she is/was involved at IG Kultur Österreich, the feminist hackerspace Mz. Baltazar's Laboratory, the sound art festival Klangmanifeste, the art space Symposion Lindabrunn, and the community-based streaming platform echoraeume.klingt.org. In 2019, she received the Recognition Award for Media Arts, Lower Austria. Latest Publication: Robert Misik, Christine Schörkhuber and Harald Welzer (eds.), Arbeit ist unsichtbar. Die bisher nicht erzählte Geschichte, Gegenwart und Zukunft der Arbeit. Vienna: Picus Verlag. Upcoming Release: Lullabies to wake up (Christine Schörkhuber and Zorka Wollny), Warsaw: Bocian Records.

Kristina Pia Hofer is a media theorist, musician, and performer based in Vienna. She currently holds an Elise Richter postdoc project at the Department of Media Theory, University of Applied Arts Vienna, and is working on a *habilitation* entitled *Situating Cinesonics: Materialities of Sound in Audiovisual Art*.

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