

SUONI PER IL POPOLO

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Interview with Byron Westbrook by Deanna Radford

ISLAND FREQUENCIES, CKUT 90.3FM AND BSTB PRESENT BYRON WESTBROOK, KARL FOUSEK AND EMILIE MOUCHOUS AT BAR LE RITZ PDB ON FRIDAY, DECEMBER 4. DOORS: 21H, SHOW: 22H. PWYC, \$10 SUGGESTED. TEXT AND INTERVIEW BY DEANNA RADFORD, @DEANNARADFORD



"A MAJOR THREAD OF MY WORK DEALS WITH GENERATING CONVERSATION AND INTERACTION AROUND SOUND AND HOW IT SHAPES OUR AWARENESS. I TRY TO CREATE SITUATIONS THAT USE ABSTRACT SOUND AS A CONDUIT FOR AN AUDIENCE TO WORK TOGETHER TO GENERATE THEIR OWN EXPERIENCE." -BYRON WESTBROOK

BROOKLYN-BASED SOUND ARTIST AND MUSICIAN BYRON WESTBROOK CREATES EXPANSIVE SONIC TEXTURES. MORE THAN THAT, HIS IMMERSIVE PROJECT CORRIDORS FOREGROUNDED SOUND, IMAGE AND LIGHT FOR LIVE, MULTICHANNEL, SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCES AND INSTALLATIONS. CORRIDORS RELEASED RECORDINGS ON SEDIMENTAL, PERFECT WAVE AND MONTREAL'S LOS DISCOS ENFANTASMES WHICH SOLD-OUT HIS LIMITED EDITION CASSETTE. THIS FALL, BYRON WESTBROOK RELEASED *PRECIPICE* UNDER HIS GIVEN NAME ON THE ROOT STRATA LABEL. THE MULTIFACETED ARTIST ALSO RECENTLY COMPLETED *INTERVAL/HABITAT*, A LARGE-SCALE SOUND AND LIGHT INSTALLATION, AT DISJECTA CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER IN PORTLAND OREGON.

AMONG OTHER THINGS IN THIS INTERVIEW, WESTBROOK DISCUSSES HIS INTEREST IN PERCEPTION, HIS TIME WORKING AT THE EXPERIMENTAL INTERMEDIA FOUNDATION AND HIS DESIRE TO GENERATE SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT BY AUDIENCES.

HE ANSWERED THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS BY EMAIL IN NOVEMBER 2015.

HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT COMPOSING YOUR ALBUM *PRECIPICE*? HAS YOUR CREATIVE PROCESS CHANGED MUCH FROM RECORDING TO RECORDING?

BW: MY PROCESS HAS A NUMBER OF OVERLAPPING STEPS THAT HAPPEN MONTHS OR EVEN YEARS APART. I SPEND A LOT OF TIME RECORDING MYSELF JUST PLAYING WITH INSTRUMENTS - BOTH ELECTRONIC AND ACOUSTIC - AND AM CONSTANTLY BUILDING AND UPDATING BANKS OF RECORDINGS OF IMPROVISATION ON AN ARRAY OF THINGS. I "PRACTICE" BY PLAYING BACK DIFFERENT SOUNDS LAYERED ON TOP OF EACH OTHER - ALSO AN IMPROVISATORY PROCESS - WHERE THE SOUNDS ARE OFTEN VOICED THROUGH DIFFERENT KINDS OF SPEAKERS AND SPEAKER ARRANGEMENTS. A LOOSE COMPOSITION USUALLY FORMS FOR DIFFERENT PIECES AND OVER TIME AND THINGS SOLIDIFY A BIT MORE IN PERFORMANCES IN FRONT OF AN AUDIENCE. FOR THE MOST PART THIS HAS BEEN MY METHOD FOR MAKING MUSIC TO BE PERFORMED LIVE SINCE 2007 OR SO, WITH THE ONLY DIFFERENCE BEING THAT THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I RECORDED OTHER MUSICIANS AND NOW I JUST USE RECORDINGS OF MYSELF.

DO YOU HAVE A FAVOURITE INSTRUMENT OR CREATIVE TOOL TO WORK WITH?

BW: I WILL LIST MY LEAST FAVORITE, WHICH IS MULTI-TRACK EDITING SOFTWARE. I PREFER TO USE MY EARS RATHER THAN MY EYES IN THE PROCESS OF GENERATING TIME-BASED WORK, AND FIND IT MUCH EASIER TO WORK WITH INTUITION AND PHYSICAL TOOLS INSTEAD OF ARRANGING ON A TIMELINE. FOR THIS, I USE A LARGE MIXER AND SOME MEDIA PLAYERS RATHER THAN SOFTWARE. I ALSO DO NOT LIKE TO USE ANY SAMPLE LOOPING, WHICH IS COMPLETELY ABSENT IN MY WORK.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF MOUNTING *INTERVAL/HABITAT* INSTALLATION AND PERFORMANCES AT DISJECTA IN PORTLAND EARLIER THIS MONTH? WHAT WAS THE CREATIVE IMPETUS BEHIND IT?

BW: THIS IS A MAJOR INSTALLATION WORK OF MINE THAT I HAVE BEEN DEVELOPING FOR MANY YEARS. IT IS AN EXTREMELY AMBITIOUS PROJECT THAT REQUIRES A VERY LARGE-SIZED GALLERY SPACE. IT USES MULTI-CHANNEL SOUND SYNCHRONIZED WITH AROUND 20 POWERFUL THEATER LIGHTING FIXTURES IN AN HOUR-LONG SEQUENCE OF "SCENE CHANGES".

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THE PROJECT IS PRESENTED AS A SORT OF OPEN/EMPTY STAGE THAT IMPOSES TIME-EDITS AND TRANSITIONS - SIMILAR TO THE EDITS OF FILM - OVER ANY ACTIVITY THAT TAKES PLACE INSIDE.

THE PIECE IS FOCUSED ON AN INTERSECTION OF SOCIAL AND PERCEPTUAL ASPECTS AND LOOKS AT HOW THESE THINGS CAN BE IN CONVERSATION WITH EACH OTHER DYNAMICALLY. AS PART OF THIS EXHIBITION AT DISJECTA, WE CURATED 12 PERFORMANCES OF MOSTLY GROUP INTERACTIONS (OF DANCERS, EXPERIMENTAL MOVEMENT, POETS, AND A FEW MUSICIANS) TO CREATE A SPACE OF EXPERIMENTATION WITH THE PIECE.

WITH THE INCLUSION OF CONCRETE POETRY IN THE *CONCRETE /CONCERT* PORTION OF *INTERVAL /HABITAT* - WHAT TRANSPIRED WHEN PERFORMERS INCORPORATED THE SPOKEN WORD?

BW: THE PIECE HAS A GREAT EFFECT ON CONVERSATION AND LEGIBILITY SO IT SEEMED OBVIOUS TO ASK PEOPLE WORKING WITH TEXT AS SPOKEN, HEARD AND READ. THE "EDITS" OF THE PIECE CAN PUNCTUATE OR RE-FRAME IN WAYS THAT ARE UNINTENDED. THE DIFFERENT VOLUMES OF SOUND OFFER THRESHOLDS FOR HEARING AND ATTENTION, AND THE WAY THAT THE LIGHTING WORKS CAN INTERFERE WITH THE ABILITY TO READ. IT BECOMES SOMETHING THAT BOTH THE PERFORMER AND AUDIENCE NAVIGATE TOGETHER AND HAS POTENTIAL TO GENERATE A SENSE OF INTIMACY AND EMPATHY BETWEEN THE TWO. SOME PERFORMERS READ TEXT THAT BECAME DISTORTED, SOME HANDED OUT TEXT FOR THE AUDIENCE TO READ AS THE PIECE CHANGED AND SOME INTERACTED DIRECTLY WITH THE AUDIENCE.

IN WHAT WAYS MIGHT YOUR TIME WORKING WITH EXPERIMENTAL INTERMEDIA FOUNDATION (WITH PHILL NIBLOCK) HAVE INFORMED YOUR CREATIVE PRACTICE?

BW: THIS WAS MORE OF AN INFLUENCE FOR ME MANY YEARS AGO WHEN I WAS FIRST DEVELOPING MY PRACTICE, OBSERVING DIFFERENT WAYS OF APPROACHING ABSTRACT SOUND AND GENERATIVE PROCESSES. BEYOND REALLY GETTING TO KNOW A SPECIFIC ROOM REALLY WELL, WHAT LEFT THE GREATEST MARK WAS A SUMMER WHERE I LIVED AT THE EI LOFT WHILE PHILL WAS AWAY AND USED THE SPACE AS A STUDIO TO DEVELOP MY PROCESS.



IMAGE: NAROA LIZAR

I'M CURIOUS ABOUT YOUR INTEREST IN GENERATING SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH YOUR SOUND ART. DO YOU HAVE A PARTICULAR VISION FOR SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT?

BW: A MAJOR THREAD OF MY WORK DEALS WITH GENERATING CONVERSATION AND INTERACTION AROUND SOUND AND HOW IT SHAPES OUR AWARENESS. I TRY TO CREATE SITUATIONS THAT USE ABSTRACT SOUND AS A CONDUIT FOR AN AUDIENCE TO WORK TOGETHER TO GENERATE THEIR OWN EXPERIENCE. IDEALLY IT IS A SITUATION WHERE SOMETHING MIGHT EMERGE FROM THE MATERIALS AND POSSIBILITIES THAT I PRESENT.

THE ELEMENTS YOU WORK WITH - SOUND, IMAGE AND LIGHT - MAKE FOR A SALIENT MIX. DO YOU VIEW YOUR WORK IN CONVERSATION WITH OTHER ART FORMS USING THESE SAME ELEMENTS?

BW: I AM CONCERNED WITH PERCEPTION SO THOSE ARE BASIC THINGS THAT I CONSIDER. I AM RESPONDING TO ARTISTS SUCH AS TURRELL AND ROBERT IRWIN IN A WAY, IN REACTION TO ISSUES THAT I'VE HAD WITH THEIR WORKS. THOSE ARTISTS TEND TO DEAL ONLY WITH THE VISUAL AND I HAVE A PROBLEM WITH THE FACT THAT THEY OFTEN DON'T SEEM TO CONSIDER THAT THERE MAY BE SOCIAL ELEMENTS OR SOUND ELEMENTS FROM THE PRESENCE OF AUDIENCE.

I THINK IT IS IMPORTANT TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE FACT THAT THERE IS ANOTHER RANGE OF POTENTIAL EXPERIENCE THAT CAN COME FROM THOSE ELEMENTS, PARTICULARLY WHEN DEALING WITH TOTAL, IMMERSIVE SPACES. ALSO, A LOT OF THAT ARTWORK TENDS TO POSITION ITSELF AS AN END, AND I HOPE THAT I CAN PRESENT WORK THAT OFFERS A BEGINNING.

DOES YOUR APPROACH TO GENERATING LISTENING SPACES IN GALLERIES OR OUTDOORS TRANSLATE EASILY INTO MORE TRADITIONAL MUSIC PERFORMANCE VENUES? HOW MIGHT YOUR APPROACH DIFFER?

BW: I AM ALWAYS THINKING ABOUT ARCHITECTURE AND HOW SOUND IS CAN BE ARCHITECTURAL MATERIAL - HOW SOUND ACTS/REACTS IN DIFFERENT SPACES, HOW IT AFFECTS THE AUDIENCE; HOW IT CAN BRING THEM TOGETHER OR POTENTIALLY ENCOURAGE OR DISCOURAGE CERTAIN RESPONSES. I HAVE DIFFERENT THREADS OF WORK THAT APPLY TO DIFFERENT PERFORMANCE VENUES AND I CHOOSE/PROPOSE ACCORDINGLY.

YOUR FAVOURITE ALBUMS OR, WHAT MIGHT YOU BE LISTENING TO OF LATE?

BW: HARD TO SAY FAVORITES, BUT THIS IS WHAT I'VE BEEN PLAYING THE MOST WHILE TRAVELING RECENTLY:

DATE PALMS "DUSTED SESSIONS"
MATTEAH BAIM "FALLING THEATER"
MICHAEL VALLERA "OPEN ROOM EP"
SUKSHRI KESAR BAI KERKAR "RAGA LALAT / RAGA MALKAUNS"
COSTIN MIEKEANU "CAROUSEL"
