

A Compositional and Performative Process

Marc Behrens

What reads like a genetic sequence is a condensation of title fragments of various compositions or batches of sound recordings I used for live music performance between 2006 and 2013. The analogy to genetic sequences is intended and makes sense when looking at the processual development of the music for these live performances.

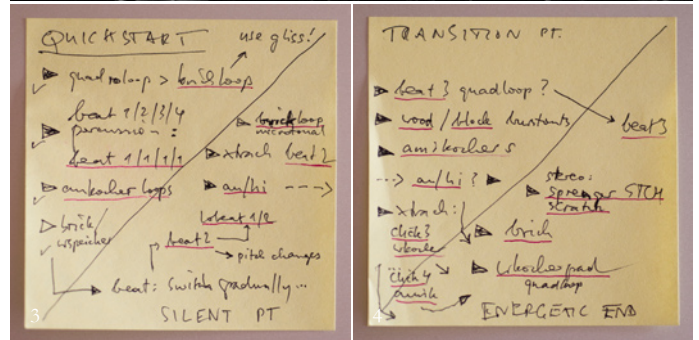
2006: Immersion

“Immersion 4” was presented at “interface, festival for music and related arts” in Berlin (Germany) as part of a collaborative performance with Berlin-based audiovisual duo Springer|Parker (who produced parallel overhead projections, frottages of the floor and walls, http://www.springerparker.com/works_memoria.html, using a separate title for the continuation of their somewhat parallel work: “Memoria”) and Australian artist Philip Brophy (<http://www.philipbrophy.com>, sampling keyboard) (images 1 and 2). Work on this piece started with an exploration of the venue, a particular architectural space, the Kleine[r] Wasserspeicher, a building located in Berlin’s Eastern district Prenzlauer Berg (presently the Singuhr gallery space: <http://www.singuhr.de/page.php?ID=647>). It is a 19th century water reservoir with a circular floorplan and a structure of concentric archways. The dome that covers it is embedded in an artificial hill.

Together with Maik Timm of Springer|Parker I made quadrophonic recordings in the space, dragging objects through space, to make movement and the resulting shifting reverb and reflections audible. In an attempt to be site-specific, the idea was to later, during performance, diffuse those recordings quadrophonically back into the space. Found objects were dragged through the circular building: a brick, a concrete block, a wooden plank, all found on site. People stomping on the building’s dome from the outside were also recorded. During later performances in other spaces, the effect of the reverberation is even greater in contrast to the usually dryer acoustics. Especially the brick, dragged for a long time, encircles the audience and opens the space beyond the speakers on a four-channel system. Other sounds used were boiling and evaporating water in various hot water boilers. There is a rough compositional structure to follow, that existed in the form of handwritten sticky notes (images 3 and 4).

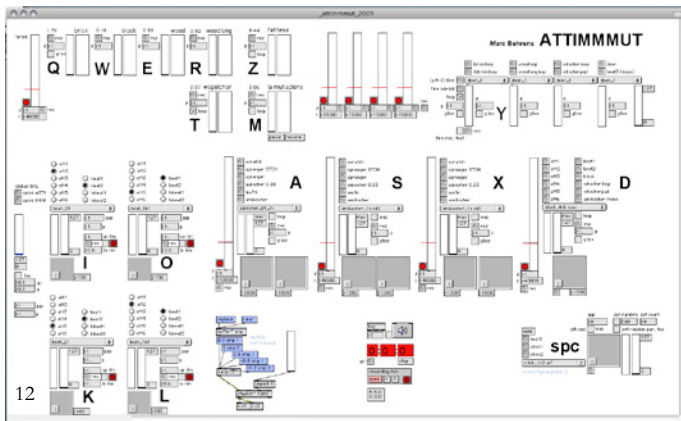
Audio was diffused into the space in two concentric spheres corresponding to the concentric walls of the building (each had a quadrophonic PA system), with Philip’s sound in the inner, my own sound in the outer sphere.

For “Immersion” a MaxMSP patch (imm_player.pat, image 5) was built, which controls the use of sound files stored on the computer. It contains various sections that do slightly different things, each slot’s on/off is linked to a letter key (stop command being the shift-[key]). The selection of sounds played with this patch (a machine) is a mix of automated



- 1 during performance of “Immersion”, Springer/Parker, Philip Brophy and Marc Behrens, September 2006, photo by Interface Festival
- 2 during performance of “Immersion”, Springer/Parker, Philip Brophy and Marc Behrens, September 2006, photo by Thomas G. A. Mank
- 3–4 sticky notes for performance

and manual selection. While some are determined by simple random choices within a given number of possible items to choose from (aleatoric), others are willfully chosen by the performer. This establishes a tension between the concept of the music over time in the performer’s imagination on the one hand, and a challenge for him on the other hand, having to steer and react to the stream of choices the machine provides. The latter had beforehand been determined by the performer setting the machine’s parameters. The sound material, which is at the base of the machine’s output, is the product of coordinated willful editing and composition.



12 2009 version of MaxMSP patch for "Attimmut"

office work with it. I want to encounter that practice in a different way and link the laptop computer as instrument with the purpose quoted above.

The first version of the MaxMSP patch for "Attimmut" is an updated version of the 2008 version of the patch for "Immersion", but with 2 new quadrophonic slots (**Z/M**), new sound banks and some improved controls added (image 12).

After each performance the patch was saved and small improvements made until in June 2011 the patch was renamed into "Mutattnarcimm" and changed into the next stage. Performed 2009/2010 in Porto (Portugal), 2009 in Bergen (Norway), 2010 in Rennes, Marseille, Nantes (France) and Saarbrücken (Germany, excerpt).

2009: Le Combinazioni

This was an offspring of "Attimmut". Different recordings of metal objects (these were actually leftovers from the production of "Unit", an installation consisting of aluminium frame drums) were made (images 13 and 14), but this time some of those objects were also going to be physically present during the performance, in a heap including their wrapping materials (image 15).

Four bass transducers were placed loosely inside that heap and could be controlled through individual slots of sine wave tones that would make them resonate (at times hitting one of the transducers' resonance frequencies in sub-bass range, making them jump). Some of the objects were placed in a way that they, after some vibration, would topple at certain moments during performance. The premiere performance of the piece was presented in an evening dedicated to comparing Luigi Nono's compositional ideas (in my case mainly the "musical islands" [isole musicali] with contemporary experimental practices. "Le Combinazioni" was performed in Cologne and Frankfurt (Germany).

The dedicated Max/MSP patch (image 16) is basically a variation of the "Attimmut" patch. The **H/J/K/L** slots are linked to tone generators producing bass frequencies for the transducers. The frequency values can be typed in (hard-set) or adjusted with glissando faders.



14–15 recording of an aluminium ring for "Le Combinazioni"

16 live setup of objects, Cologne (Germany), July 2009

14 view of unlocked MaxMSP patch for "Le Combinazioni" with red-orange gel on the laptop computer's screen, **H/J/K/L** being faders for sine wave frequencies going to the bass transducers

2011: Mutattnarcimm

An additional set (several banks) of sounds is added that comes from a separate, unrelated piece still in concept stage as of 2012, called "L'Anti-Narcisse". That set contains field recordings from Marseille harbour and the Île de Frioul. The sound set from "Immersion" does not play a strong role anymore. The set is further updated with a number of files generated from the original "La Mutazione" and "L'Attesa" sounds that were fed into the Autocousmatic application (made by Nicholas Collins, <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Users/nc81/autocousmatic.html>), as well as a number of recordings made in a metal workshop of rolling



17–18 performing “Mutattnarcimm” at the Brisbane Powerhouse, Brisbane (Australia), July 2011, photos © Bryan Spencer 2011

19 performing “Mutattnarcimm” at the Kuala Lumpur gallery, Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), June 2011, photo by Tok Phillip

various metal discs across a coarse floor, and of myself slapping a wet towel in a small dryly reverberating space. Still, all the sounds are of percussive nature. The bigger variety of sounds at disposal creates now a structure that is more variable. Although many sounds are only used briefly and very few times, the much broadened and enhanced setup welcomes experimentation. Each layer of the evolutionary path from “Immersion” to “Mutattnarcimm” adds to either “safe” decisions made on the basis of the once imagined block structure or new decisions to try out and contradict the idea of repeating a piece in concert.

During the Australian performances I also elaborated on my actual movements. Certainly I am not a dancer, but I became a bit more acrobatic, usually involving not only the table or stand where the computer was put on, but also a bar stool (images 17, 18).

The DIY speakers previously used are now included in the live setup again. The idea behind using these (which also, since 2006 have been updated with better broadband speakers) is to create two spheres of diffusion (it could be 4, but that is actually limited by check-in luggage weight and size), one of very moderate power, close to the performer, who after a while positions the speakers in the audience while they are in use, the other immersive, with high power, around the audience. In Brisbane, Sydney and Cairns the performances ended with a very long fadeout that counterbalanced



20 performing “Mutattnarcimm” at Stromraum, Stuttgart (Germany), September 2012, photo by Eckhart Holzboog

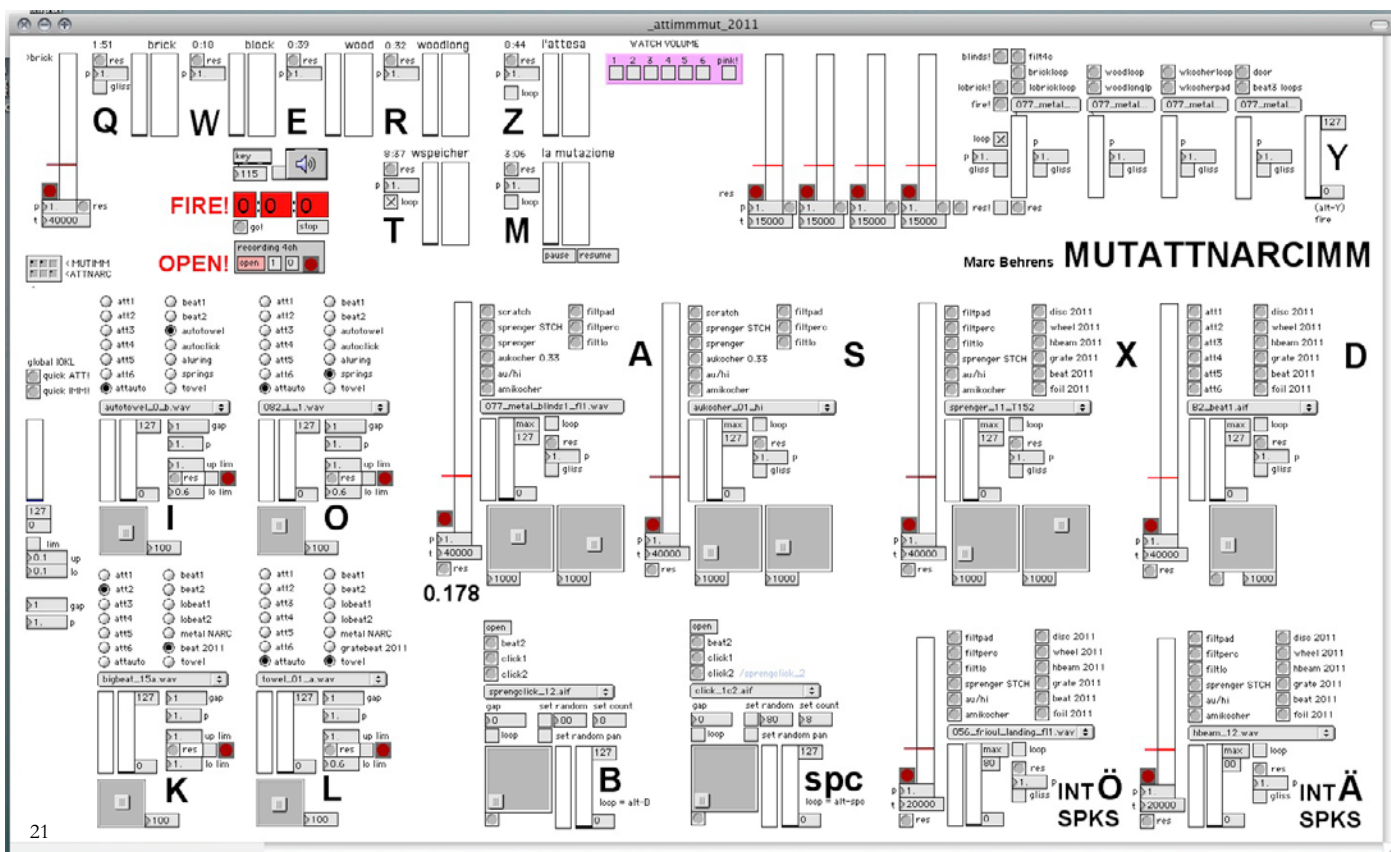
the movement from the intimate to the immersive diffusion spaces (which are directly related to the setup implemented in the very first, collaborative performance of “Immersion”) at the piece’s beginning. Particularly interesting here is that in Brisbane the audience was mostly lying down on the carpeted floor, and when the ending drone sound receded over a rather long time, while I balanced on the bar stool turned upside-down, tiny breathing noises could be heard – the audience experiencing their own audio intimacy. For the Cairns performance, the venue was open-aired in a quiet area of the city, and night insects and some frogs were audible while the sound faded out over a period of circa 5 minutes.

At the performance in Kuala Lumpur which took place in a rather large gallery, also two chairs, producing a loud scraping sound were very slowly dragged ca. 20 meters away from the audience and back during a quiet part of the piece (image 19). This sounds like a little extravaganza, but actually is an important feature as it opened the sound space asymmetrically for a period of time. Since the late 1990s I have used the conditions of the performance space to be redefined or adapted to in performance.

Max/MSP patch (image 20) as of December 2011, still lazily in MaxMSP 4.6, had the following changes/additions:

- the 4ch random slots have now a mix of monophonic and stereophonic sounds, each 14 banks,
- 2+1 stereo slots: 2 of them (**A/D**) have 9 banks, one (**X**) has 12 (not identical),
- **D**: the monophonic slot has now 12 banks,
- there are now 2 mono slots (**B/spc**) with retriggered random pan,
- finally there are 2 additional stereo slots (**Ö/Ä**) for the DIY speakers with 12 banks each.

Performed 2011 in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Perth, Melbourne, Brisbane, Sydney, Cairns (Australia), Palermo (Italy – during the Opensound chapter of Live!Xem 2011, organized by AntiTesi), 2012 in Stuttgart and Karlsruhe (Germany), Dundalk (Ireland), and in 2013 in Valparaiso (Chile), Córdoba (Argentina) and Viseu (Portugal).



- 21 MaxMSP patch for "Mutattnarcimm", version December 2011
- 22 album artwork sketch for the forthcoming digital album

ATT IMM MUT TUM MMI TTA MUT ATT NARC IMM

Attimmuttummmittamutattnarcimm

"ATT IMM MUT TUM MMI TTA MUT ATT NARC IMM" is planned to become a digital album of the recordings gathered from some of the described performances.