

Alien bodies : Stefan Prins' aesthetics of music

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Alien bodies

Stefan Prins' aesthetics of music

Tomasz Biernacki

Young Belgian composer Stefan Prins (born in 1979) stands out as one of the most promising talents of his generation. Tomasz Biernacki follows his musical trail, revealing the trajectory of an artist grappling with his time, from cybernetics, digital reality, to the US drone war, as well as the very idea of avant-garde today.

Culture enters a new digital era. Obvious, it seems. Yet, as can be seen for instance in Harry Lehmann's latest book *Die digitale Revolution der Musik*¹, still fraught with many problems and conflicts, for instance with the institutions and their habits (an old law system generating absurdities and contradictions, the lack of willingness on the part of publishers and organizations to adapt to the new situation, etc).

But nothing will be like before, when it becomes finally apparent that culture is not just a commodity – something material, a subject to the rules of a simple trade –, but a kind of self-copying mechanism, a self-critical yet all-encompassing process engulfing the whole society. Trying to stop or restrain it always fails – for human beings are not just merely consuming culture (as in the typical neoliberal discourse), but living in a cultural environment constantly reproducing its codes and trails, thereby creating new responses, contexts and meta-codes (which can easily be seen in digital social media, like YouTube for instance). The digitalization of the world leads to new paths in our cultural behaviour and forces us to re-think many of yesterday's dogmas.

DIGITALIZATION OF ART, DIGITALIZATION OF LIFE

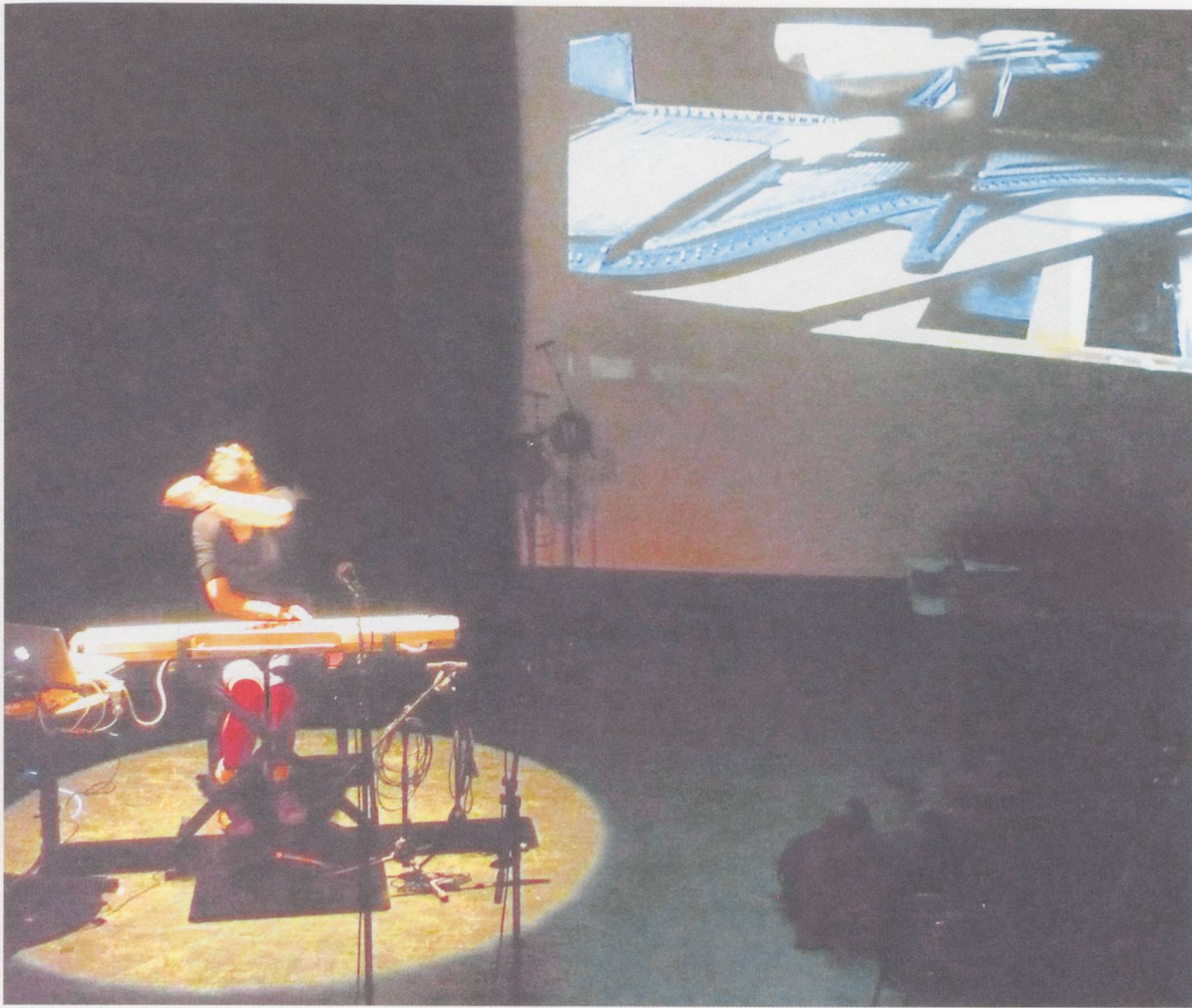
Note, however, that the impetus leading to the digitalizing of culture is just a derivative of a larger digitalizing momentum at play in the entire world. When everything around becomes digital, art will also be involved in a process of reflection. What

does it mean for us? The digitalizing of the world means that in every second someone records an image of his/her surroundings. The world is constantly filmed and photographed. The probability that a picture of some unexpected, unique or very ephemeral event is captured by someone's cell phone is already very large, and yet steadily increases as the prices of such devices keep decreasing. History is now happening not (only) on the pages of the written chronicles, in official documents, but rather in millions of small cellphone cameras, PDAs, or CCTV cameras on the streets. This state of affairs means also that we are subjected to constant surveillance – in public spaces as well as in our private lives².

In this situation, can an artist completely ignore this reality? Doesn't such material have enormous critical potential, the kind of potential that art has always reached for?

Young Belgian composer Stefan Prins is one of those who saw this tension emerging today in the confrontation between technology and digital reality. Among the many philosophical problems that this tension creates, one of the fundamental ones is the question of the identity of our subjectivity.

The digital world is built within the material world just in order to be able to extend it. People "live" digitally as their own creations, as characters of virtual games, or avatars inhabiting virtual social worlds. It is difficult to draw a sharp line where one world ends and the other begins – the soldiers in Iraq were mentally prepared to kill thanks to popular, gory video games, and their military actions were accompanied by a proper "soundtrack", like in a video, or a trailer for an imaginary (even



Elisa Medinilla (Nadar Ensemble) performing "Piano Hero #1", 2012. © Stefan Prins

if in this case terrifyingly real) film, in which they naturally are the main character. Consciousness seems to melt into this new world, just like in the case of a computer player, whose decisions and physical movements are transferred into a different reality, while he retains a certain mental distance to his virtual actions (which of course also depend on the degree of addiction to this type of activity).

The question you might ask can be articulated this way: who is it that manifests the person's presence in the digital world, in games, but also on forums, in comments on social networking sites, etc. – we ourselves, or rather some figure external to "us", created by our mind and yet behaving in a (more or less) autonomous way?

In Stefan Prins' works *Piano Hero #1* and *#2* the consequence of this kind of split can be witnessed, which brings the performative aspect to the level of strong gestural conflict. We are undoubtedly witnessing a kind of "game" – but of this new virtual kind. Here the physical performer uses an avatar as a "proper" player, and thus with a relatively small effort triggers extremely complex and sophisticated sound processes by just controlling their sampled film recordings on the keyboard.

This procedure opens up a vast, still unexplored field of possibilities: indeed so far the production of very sophisticated sounds was associated with serious gestural limitations, which obviously affected the overall aesthetic. For example, when Helmut Lachenmann asks a violinist to lead the bow on the sound board, it is hard to expect that this gesture might arise in any other context than "slowness", "silence" or possibly "tense expectation". With the help of digital technology there is a real possibility open for a "gestural revolution" – the separation, once and for all, of the sound from its physical identity by placing it in a virtual world, thus giving a result far from the physical restrictions of body movement and dynamics.

In *Piano Hero #1*, the either sweeping or precise movements of the virtual pianist's hands on the sound board become the material for further operations – among others, slow or reverse motion in time (of course with the consequences this has on an aural level) –, the whole of it sharply cut and pieced together again.

Prins realises here one of the most fundamental and revolutionary gestures in music: revealing and destroying fossilized mechanisms of musical reproduction, which are naturally an essential part of every traditional instrumental performance.



Nadar Ensemble performing "Generation Kill" at Platform Moskou 2013: 4 performers with gamecontroller, 4 musicians behind

At the same time digital capabilities allow for solutions that are much more radical than what was available only a few decades ago to other "gestural deconstructors" like Ferneyhough or Lachenmann.

The digital prosthesis in *Piano Hero #1* goes so far that it seems in fact to be a piece for two pianists, rather than just one: one physical and one virtual (the image of whom should be presented during performance on a life-sized screen), but the very paradox of that whole situation lies in the fact that what we perceive here as "real" is the part of the *virtual* piano, which we identify with the proper sound production, and this despite its "impossible" gestures, full of digitally magnified strength and impetus. Only when the *physical* pianist appears to us on the screen (when the live webcam is activated), he suddenly enters in the conventional world of performance and only then can we see his role as the primary, "first level" cause of the sound. It is through the reality reflected in the digital mirror that we are allowed to realise his actual presence.

Piano Hero #2 develops the idea of this previous work, this time placing the pianist at the real, physical piano, next to the additional MIDI keyboard. The performer lets the mechanics of his instrument merge with its digitally enhanced capabilities (sample recordings from the sound board) and thus generates a sound space thickened with the presence of the virtual.

TOWARDS THE HYBRID BODY

Prins sees an intriguing analogy between further extending techniques of instrumental playing (even if, as Harry Lehmann puts it, they seem to be already exhausted at this point) into the area of virtual reality, and Vernor Vinge's concept of "technological singularity", namely, computer-enhanced human beings³.

According to this hypothesis, we will soon reach the point where the border between the body and its technological extensions will be erased. In recent years, this has been noticeable for instance in rapidly improving works on the Brain-Computer Interface (BCI), the goal of which is to build an advanced tool of direct communication between the brain and its digital extensions. In this way not only gestures are subject to digitalizing (as in the case of a computer mouse or joystick), but even thoughts, intentions and the will. (We are now at the beginning of the process – in 2009 it was possible to send 4 bits of information to a computer and then to an other human receiver through thought only⁴ – but let us be aware that the speed of technological progress accelerates exponentially!).

In the cycle *Fremdkörper* (including one piece composed in 2008 and two in 2010) Prins deals with the most elemen-



the screens, 4 video-projections. © Stefan Prins

tary aesthetic problem linked to the issue of the singularity mentioned above: the coexistence in one body of two (or more) completely alien identities. Even in a digitally enhanced body, there will always be something perceived as pertaining to the “self”, something “of its own”: in the same way, even to the most sophisticated computer software the basic, binary language will remain “its own”, fundamentally different from a system of chemical interactions in which the cells of the body communicate. However, in this extended post-human body these morphologically alien elements will be forced to reach some form of unity. In this series of aesthetic studies Prins explores at least three of such basic, internal relations: extension, supplementation and transformation.

In the first work (*Fremdkörper #1*), each of the musicians plays an instrument connected to a guitar amplifier, the guitarist operating several pedals on top of that. Moreover, each of the instruments has been previously recorded and the recording has been processed electronically. The pre-recorded soundtrack is sent to the amplifiers when the musician stops playing live. But we can nevertheless observe that the sounds, which morphologically belong to each of the instruments (live or recorded and digitally processed), appear from one single physical point in space and this way support each other. The digital extends the corporeal.

In *Fremdkörper #2* we can find a similar procedure (using a complementary soundtrack), but here the role of electronics becomes more confrontational, repeatedly interrupting the linear “narration” of the instruments with a number of “intrusions”. The idea of the work revolves rather around the complementarity of alienations, which can clearly be felt in the passage in which the electric guitar uses a “human mute” – reversing the common situation in order to distort “natural” sound “artificial” props are being used. Here a resonant oral cavity becomes a kind of “prop”, which allows to control the instrument through the sound transformations generated by a toy megaphone placed over the pickup of the guitar. A similar procedure (although not as spectacular) takes place in the saxophone part, in which also certain patterns of lip movement are applied, affecting the mouthpiece and, thus, the quality of sound. One may say that here strangeness supports and complements itself. Completely different, strange natures are put in conflict, forced to cooperate. And ironically in the example described above of the toy megaphone it is a human being who supports (or is used by) a machine, not the other way around!

Fremdkörper #3 is the most eccentric work of the cycle. The material used here consists of (aesthetically completely “foreign”) recordings of song intros by Michael Jackson, subjected to a

whole spectrum of distortions and a drastically decontextualising editing process: Michael Jackson ceases to be similar to himself. The King of Pop is himself a good example of a meltdown of a physical identity – as Stefan Prins remarks in his programme note for this work⁵ – and seems to be a very accurate case of the internalizing of “foreign bodies”.

Fremdkörper #3 is a kind of distorted music. The piece starts with homophonic blocks and a melting of the ensemble into a strange macro-instrument that produces what sounds like sometimes suddenly accelerating, sometimes abruptly truncated and filtered samples. On top of that, those same instruments are exposed to intrusions of foreign objects – paper clips on the strings, dampers from aluminium trays, “inappropriate” mouthpieces... Meanwhile, the MIDI keyboard launches another “Jacksonian” sample and further complicates our task of “identification” of the perceived sounds. And indeed, this complexification is perhaps the very goal of the piece. These might be the “alien bodies” sounds the title refers to: devoid of identity, belonging to some other aural realm.

Interestingly, thanks to the digital revolution, we can now hear a new, unknown sound and directly analyse and reconstruct it, whereas in the seventies Helmut Lachenmann had yet to invent his sounds literally from scratch. Even assuming that some of the new sounds were accidental discoveries, it was still difficult to repeat them exactly, especially if they had not been recorded, let alone described and notated them in a way which could be understood and reproduced by other performers. Nowadays, any “mistake” made by a computer software can be recorded, observed and studied in detail. Digital reality allows for the free manipulation of marginal and “unwanted” instrumental sounds, so as to challenge the traditional, historical idiom of its timbre in an effective way.

FLUID BORDERS OF REALITY

One of Stefan Prins’ latest projects is *Generation Kill* (a smaller version called *Generation Kill – offspring 1* was also composed, the composer envisaging more interpretations of his project). The association of the musical performance with a video game scene is both obvious and deceptive. Indeed, what appears at first to be mindless fun, even if technologically impressive (a mixture of physical and virtual realities through the use of large screens duplicating and covering the activities of the musicians), becomes bleaker and bleaker, to the point of discomfort for the listener-viewer. The screens display videos from military drones killing real people – the realities of performance and video cross each other again, and we know by now that they are in fact both “real”: acting at both levels has very substantial, tangible results (in the same way as today’s cyberwarfare: acts of terrorism or sabotage that can be done using only the Internet, or some other forms of digital interventions on vulnerable data⁶).

The composer writes about the circumstances of the creation of this work:

Strolling through the Internet, I found at around the same time a 7-year old video-clip on YouTube which was a teaser for the TV-series *Generation Kill*, based on the homonymous book in which Evan Wright chronicled his experiences as an embedded reporter with the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion of the US Marine Corps during the 2003 Iraq invasion. One of the statements which shocked me the most was made by one of the soldiers: “It’s the ultimate rush – you’re going into the fight with a good song playing in the background”. Evan Wright explained further: “This is a war fought by the first playstation generation. One thing about them is they kill very well in Iraq.”⁷

Generation Kill can thus be understood as a new type of politically engaged work, resulting from a performative turn in the arts: not reaching for ideological slogans, as was the case in the past, but taking existing elements from the outside world (e.g. the remotely controlled drones) and, by mimicking the structure within the very construction of the work of art (the performer, and his “remote”, virtual double), exposing their nature. A work can then be understood politically because of its very way of existing as a work of art, and not just by its declaration and/or its negativity potential (in the sense of Nono and Adorno, priests of the first modernism); and at the same time, a work is finally conscious of its own image (after all, today “everything is performance”, as Schechner says, and we can finally come to be conscious of it). This type of existence of contemporary musical works is successfully described by the theoretical language of Harry Lehmann who sees in its hybrid, polymorphous appearance the result of a Gehalt-Aesthetic Turn⁸.

Here innovation of the musical material – the Holy Grail of the first modernism – can be here just a by-product of an aesthetic research focussed on completely different fields (this way Prins’ sounds maintain the characteristic defiance and freshness that can only be obtained with actual, contemporary works of art), because music abandons the dogmatic belief in its total autonomy and finally notices its involvement in a variety of contexts and ways of perception, imposing their specific identity. The ways of perception, just as any genuinely creative thinking, are fairly non-abstract acts of the will aiming in a certain direction. Capturing this nuance, Lehmann creates the idea of “concept music” which is rather (even if perhaps in a somehow simplified version) an active search for original means of connecting to the outside world, in a critical dialogue, and not the great new order for which the modernists of twentieth century so deeply longed for, the evidence of which is to be found in the excess of “-isms” in the history of art of this period. Behind every “-ism” stood the dream of a new single dictate (a “grand narrative”, as Lyotard put it in his *Postmodern Condition*), and their followers were quite aware of being in a permanent state of ideological warfare with each other.

Today, when, after those wars, only ruins of the great aesthetic systems remain, one can still find in them a huge amount of useful and fascinating objects. The point is no

longer the self-sufficient, imposing system, but the construction itself, the unique work of art (even if some of its aspects would be somehow reproducible and/or differentiated in terms of chronological progress).

Lehmann writes:

After the avant-garde posited artistic reflection as autonomous and post-modernism introduced the autonomy of the artistic medium, the work itself would finally also be released from all a priori ties to the medium and reflexive component of art, and could for the first time be successfully communicated within the art system as an autonomous (i. e., entirely unbound) work of art.⁹

In his reflection on the digital component in modern music, *The Digital Revolution in Music*, quoted at the beginning of our text, Lehmann noticed how much our idea of *sound* changed when faced with the ubiquitous presence of music samples, acting as a kind of “smallest sound unit” (replacing the by-gone written note). Samples are typically heterogeneous in nature, with the interesting consequence that operating with them creates an additional level of complexity.

Lehmann notes that the poetics of music samples determines the work of the composer, who is now acting not on the notes, tones or sounds themselves, but on the whole previously structured sound objects. In this light, of course, Helmut Lachenmann’s similar experiences (and its inspiration from the idea of instrumental *musique concrète*) seems prophetic. This might be one of the reasons why Lachenmann’s music is still a very important point of reference for many young composers (among them Prins himself). Thus, Prins’ *Piano Hero #1* is composed entirely from such musical micro-objects to an extent that the twentieth century could only have dreamt of. That it is possible now to listen to compositions conceived in this way, we owe to digital technology.

Another side-effect of digitalization is the creation of other, more mobile forms of musical notation (e.g. changing in real-time), a fruitful alternative for the static, paper notation¹⁰. Harry Lehmann himself recalls in this context Prins’ work *Infiltrationen* for four electric guitars and live electronics, which is “notated” in the form of a computer software variably shaping the course of the composition in real time, thus in a different way from performance to performance (the musicians play the material displayed live on laptop screens). At any time, each of the musicians may ask for a new instruction for his/her part, inducing changes in the musical situation for the whole ensemble. The performers face the somewhat unusual situation of being slaves to their own creativity – perhaps a state of affairs that may dawn on us, after the long-awaited creation of artificial intelligence? One might even envisage the

time when the artificial intelligence thought to relieve us from our tasks would eventually transform us into the passive objects of its intentions towards us.

Infiltrationen is a music with a strong conceptual background, which does not prevent it from being very innovative in an avant-gardist sense, meant as the interpenetration of unknown new possibilities and sounds. In this way, in the digital age, along with the Gehalt-Aesthetic Turn announced by Lehmann, the concept of the avant-garde is reborn as a critical and reflexive system of art which finally found its way out of the twentieth-century conflict between conservative ossification and impulsive negation, which, despite its sometimes wonderful results, has unfortunately been endowed with the short life of the butterfly.



All links mentioned in the notes, as well as online videos and recordings of the pieces discussed, can be accessed through this article’s webpage on www.dissonance.ch

- 1 Lehmann, Harry, *Die digitale Revolution der Musik*, Mainz: Schott 2012.
- 2 Need we even remind our readers of the recent shocking revelations concerning the US government mass surveillance program? [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PRISM_\(surveillance_program\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PRISM_(surveillance_program))
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/the-nsa-files>
<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/07/us/nsa-verizon-calls.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>
- 3 For a detailed discussion, see Vernor Vinge’s online essay “The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era”, 1993: <http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/vinge/misc/singularity.html>
- 4 There is quite a lot of information regarding Brain-Computer Interface research on the Internet. Here are two suggestions, relating to a research project of the University of Southampton: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/10/091006102637.htm>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93p7oDkA5WA>
- 5 Available on the composer’s website: http://www.stefanprins.be/eng/composesInstrument/comp_2010_03_fremdkorper3.html
- 6 This new form of warfare is currently being developed and used by the USA, for instance against Iran: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/01/world/middleeast/obama-ordered-wave-of-cyberattacks-against-iran.html?pagewanted=all>
- 7 Available on the composer’s website: http://www.stefanprins.be/eng/composesChrono/comp_2012_03.html
- 8 See for instance his text “Digitalization and Concept: A Thought Experiment Concerning New Music”, available online at: <http://www.searchnewmusic.org/lehmann.pdf>
- 9 Lehmann, Harry, “Avant-Garde Today: A Theoretical Model of Aesthetic Modernity” in: *Critical Composition Today*, Hofheim: Wolke 2006, p. 9-42 [transl. Wieland Hoban] http://www.harrylehmann.net/neu/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Harry-Lehmann_Avant-garde-Today.pdf
- 10 One must here mention the IRCAM project of “virtual score”: <http://articles.ircam.fr/textes/Cont11a/index.pdf>