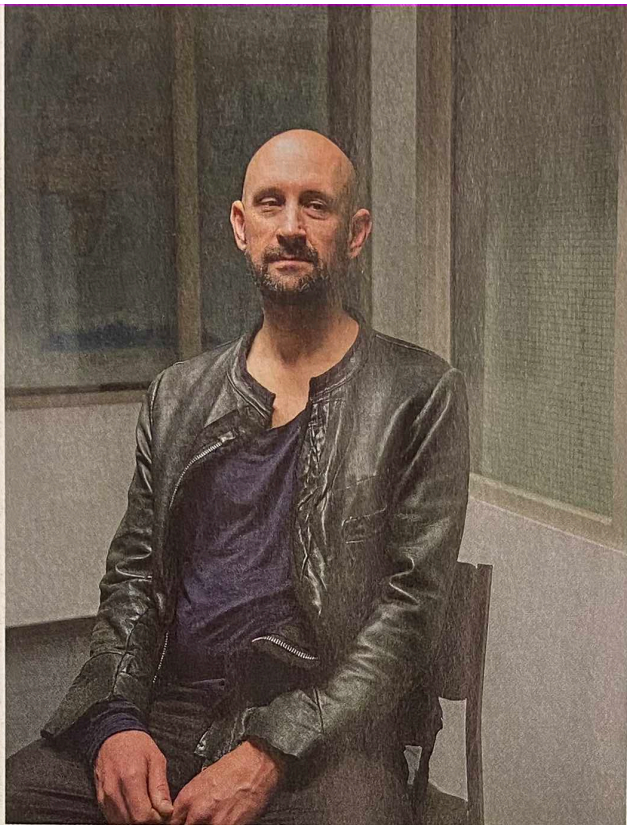


The

Area



Slide

Improvising trombonist
Matthias Muche
expands the
instrument's possibilities
with the visceral
Bonecrusher ensemble.
By **Julian Cowley**

"The main focus for me has always been the slide trombone," says Matthias Muche, speaking from Cologne. The instrument was his first choice, when he was 12. "Later I tried out others, including tuba and alphon, but as extensions of possibilities rather than a new passion." That enduring commitment to his instrument, so evident in the way Muche plays, has recently led to his formation of Bonecrusher, an ensemble in which two percussionists are teamed with no less than ten trombonists. Elaborating on the group's name, Muche mentions French-Slovenian composer Vinko Globokar, a notable precursor in exhaustive exploration of the trombone's potential.

Globokar has insisted that far from being a sacrosanct object, to be revered for how it sounds already, a musical instrument is an extension of the human body, to be stretched and developed, reconceived and reconfigured. That understanding pervades Muche's own approach, as solo performer, and in T.ON, his regular trio with double bassist Constantin Herzog and drummer Etienne Nillesen. Members of Bonecrusher come from a range of backgrounds, yet all share Muche's outlook. Together they amplify and expand his own investigations.

During the 1990s, Muche enrolled at Amsterdam's music conservatory to study jazz trombone. His aim was not merely to hone his technical abilities but crucially to learn how to play with freedom. He was aware of the improvisatory resourcefulness of trombonists such as Ray Anderson and George Lewis, but was no less excited to discover what had been achieved by interpreters of contemporary music scores, especially Globokar. "We eventually met and discussed his own compositions, such as *Discours II*, for five trombones, written in the 60s. That had a huge impact on me as a young player; I was really shocked when I heard it."

By the time they met, Muche had also read *Einatmen – Ausatmen (Breathing In – Breathing Out)*, a book

edited by Ekkehard Jost and Werner Klüppelholz which takes a detailed look at Globokar's extended techniques. "It's awesome! I had no idea until I looked in that book of all the wild things he'd done in the 70s, but then I said OK, so you have already done that," Muche laughs, with appreciative resignation. Further revelations came when he read Stuart Dempster's *The Modern Trombone*. References in that book introduced him to the trombone playing of James Fulkerson, whose bold innovations continue to reverberate strongly through his own work.

In 2008, Muche attended Cologne's Academy of Media Arts, where he collaborated with students working with computers, furthering his trombone research while connecting with "the digital aesthetic". In a sense, he recognises, this was a consolidation, rather than a radical departure. "I grew up singing in a church choir. That had a big influence on the way I listen. The overall sound of music was more important than particular elements, such as melody. That prepared me for working with electronic and digital musicians, where it's like being part of a multichannel installation. Distribution of different sound resources within a particular space has become very important for my work, continuing into Bonecrusher."

The visceral quality of Muche's playing arises from physical involvement with the instrument that extends to the vibrational and molecular level. This enables him to be highly receptive to the timbres, textures and colouration of electronic music. A significant project reflecting that receptiveness involved bold adaptation of Markus Schmickler's electronic composition *Sator Rotas*, for acoustic realisation by Muche and bassist Achim Tang, with Philip Zoubek on prepared piano. "That really expanded my approach," he acknowledges.

"Having to find ways of switching between pitches and sounds; not clinging to the idea of the instrument having just one dimension, but also not consciously

thinking, now I'm in this dimension, now I'm in that." A recording of that adaptation was released by Creative Sources in 2008.

At the Academy of Media Arts, Muche was taught by Anthony Moore, widely known as a member of Slapp Happy. "We talked together about artistic ideas, and became good friends. Anthony then wrote a text for me, which is strongly connected to air – something I'm very interested in, of course. I had to find a way to perform it."

Broadly taking his lead from James Fulkerson, Muche attached plastic tubes to his instrument. Moore's recorded voice, played back through a talk box effects unit, was then channelled through his trombone as he played or, when diverted, emerged from another trombone bell, placed a few metres away. Under the title *Beller*, this piece appears on Bonecrusher's new release on Col Legno, along with three other tightly disciplined and carefully spatialised performances of Muche's own compositions, and of Matthias Müller's splendidly gaseous *Luffft!*.

In recent weeks, T.ON have returned to live performance, presenting a concert at Cologne's Stadtgarten, with Nate Wooley guesting on trumpet. For their next release the trio have commissioned Wooley, along with flutist Anne La Berge, electronics musician Sam Pluta and clarinetist Madison Greenstone to compose and record pieces for use with a version of the trombone set-up devised for *Beller*. Recordings, made in five churches, each with its own distinctive acoustic character, are scheduled for release early in 2022.

Muche regards Wooley as an especially important colleague: "His playing is such a physical experience, and he's such an intrepid member of the movement to redefine the language, and the physical boundaries, of the horn." A description that is equally applicable to the dynamic trombonist who spoke those words. □ Matthias Muche's *Bonecrusher* is released by Col Legno