先風

Frischzelle

Early Winds

German-Chinese exchange in intermedial arts
by Zeitkunst e.V.

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Introduction /

Rapid progress in computer miniaturisation has meant that in just a few short years the laptop has become a universal instrument with which sound, image and graphics can be processed in real-time on stage. Due to technical advancements and the increasing affordability of computers, large numbers of musicians and visual artists are now able to implement laptops for improvisational purposes. The backgrounds of the artists working in the field of computer-based performance is as varied as the manner in which they use their computers. The so-called *laptop musicians* are anything but a clearly defined species. They come to live electronics with diverse backgrounds, for example, through academically informed electro-acoustic music, free improvised jazz or dance music.

The same applies to the media arts, for here too, the interest in computers can have its origins in such varied disciplines as kinetic art and robotics, film and video, as well as various forms of installation art. Even now it is impossible to keep track of the range of activities taking place today. In addition to numerous institutions that carry out organised research and development in the area of new media, there is a small yet international scene of musicians and artists who implement universal programming languages such as *MAX/MSP*, *SuperCollider* or *PD* to develop their own codes and technical setups. Although this scene has a good network at its disposal, it is almost impossible to get a general overview of current activities without completely overlooking interesting approaches and regional scenes. It was this issue that Sven Hahne and Matthias Muche wished to address when they founded the organisation Zeitkunst e.V. in Cologne in 2006.

Since its initiation, Zeitkunst e.V. has served both as a forum for the discussion of the artistic applications of computer-based media when combined with traditional acoustic instruments, and as an organisational platform for international festivals aimed specifically at bringing together artists and musicians from different countries.
Thus Zeitkunst e.V. has since coordinated the festival *Frischzelle*, previously organised solely by Hahne and Muche, at which artists and musicians from Cologne are given the opportunity to meet their colleagues from abroad. Up until now the highlight of the *Frischzelle* festival, and also the motivation for this catalogue, was the *Frischzelle / Early Winds* festival 2007 to which the organisers welcomed artists not only from Germany, France and Belgium, but also 35 musicians and media artists from Shanghai and Beijing.

Das Mollsche Gesetz and *Telefante*, photo: Andreas Hirsch

Oral Beats, photo: Matthias Kneppeck

With their festival *Frischzelle*, Zeitkunst e.V. has developed an event format which enables ever-changing constellations of a group of around 100 participants from a variety of countries to regularly meet. Initially a festival for intermedial improvisation based in Cologne, *Frischzelle* had quickly established itself beyond the borders of the city on the Rhine. With guest performances at the Düsseldorf *altstadtherbst kulturfestival*, the *Beethoven Festival* in Bonn and the *Moers Jazz Festival*, Zeitkunst e.V. had succeeded in bringing experimental art forms, previously only acknowledged by an exclusive minority, to a wider audience.

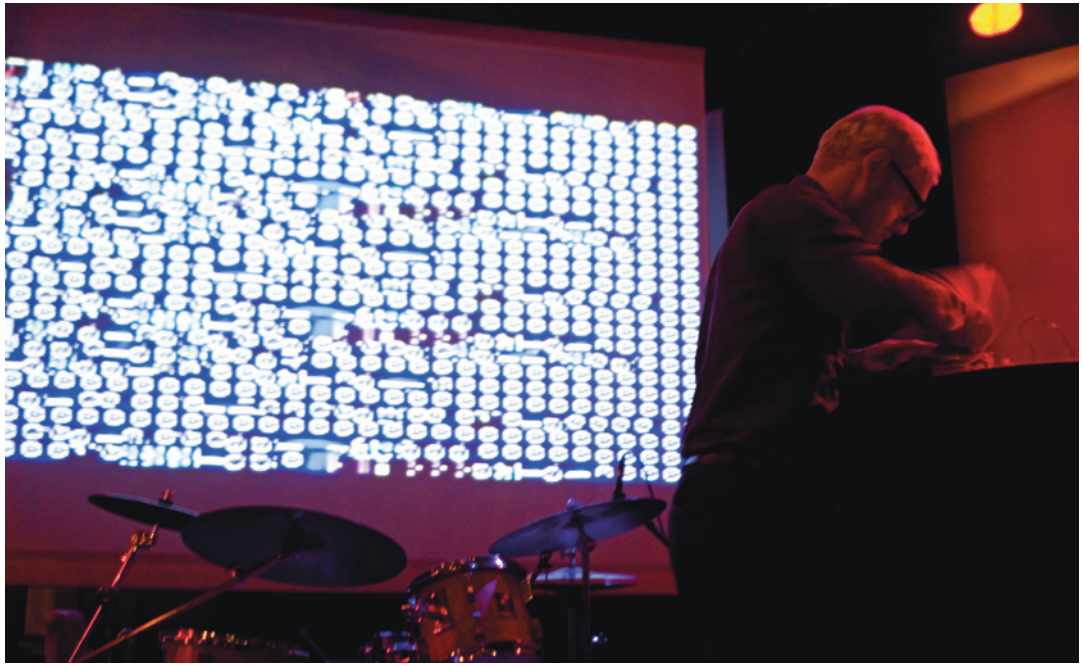
Frischzelle – Festival for Intermedial Improvisation /

The media artists and musicians Sven Hahne and Matthias Muche initiated *Frischzelle* as a festival for improvisation and composition. Their aim was to experiment with various forms of interaction between the classical instrument and electronic sound production, as well as with audio-visual performance, literature and dance projects.

The effort required in bringing various medial worlds together is equal to the complexity of implementing this on stage. The staging of *Frischzelle* concerts often seems more like some kind of futuristic alchemical laboratory, but that doesn't alter the fact that the main idea behind *Frischzelle* is to place the individual at the centre of the performance. This means in physical and mental relation to the audience, to the fellow performers, to the equipment developed by them and to the room itself. Ideally the complex connections between various technologies and art forms will result in a synthesis, which enables the inherently multimedial performance to be perceived as a self-contained form of artistic expression; a *gesamtkunstwerk*.

Das Mollsche Gesetz and *Telefante*, photo: Andreas Hirsch

Sebastian Gramss, top: Chan Yuan Zhao, bottom: Eivind Loning, all photos: Thorsten Schneider



Niels Hofheinz, photo: Thorsten Schneider

By taking the risk of including non-musical elements in their improvisation, the musicians leave behind traditional forms of musical performance. For the media artists however, the challenge is how to react spontaneously to both the music and to the audience in an impromptu situation.
The structure of the festival – three to four performances each evening over several days – encourages this commitment to spontaneity and flexibility. Ensembles that have come together especially for the festival and which have an equal number of instrumentalists, electronic musicians and media artists, are given preference. When the group comes together for the first time there is a certain intensity, which ideally is transmitted to the audience from the performers on stage.

The festival has its origins in the project *Q-Spektrum* with Sven Hahne (video) and Norman Muller (video) from the Academy of Media Arts, and the ensemble *Cauldron* with, amongst others, Matthias Muche (t rombone). It was developed in collaboration with the pianist Paulo Alvares and the Ensemble for Improvisation, New Chamber Music and Aleatoric Music from the University of Music in Cologne.

It was also thanks to the dedication of Reiner Michalke from *Stadtgarten*, Cologne, Prof. Anthony Moore, Director of the Academy of Media Arts (KHM) at the time and current head of the KHM Music Department, Prof. Josef Protschka, head of the Cologne University of Music, Dr. Heike Sauer (MHS) and the Mayoress Angela Spizig that *Frischzelle* was able to establish the *Stadtgarten* as a meeting point for both the local and international independent scenes, and further develop the already existing cooperation between the KHM and the University of Music, Cologne at this venue.

The many years of work and the diverse range of activities surrounding the *Frischzelle* festival was followed by the founding of the association Zeitkunst e.V.

Carsten Goertz, Gerriert K. Sharma

Daniel Riegler, photo: Thorsten Schneider

in 2006, which serves as the focus for a scene of young interdisciplinary artists. With over 100 members Zeitkunst e.V. now constitutes an extremely active network that stretches from Europe, to the Middle East and East Asia. The festival *Frischzelle* was able to continue to develop and enter into collaborative projects outside of Cologne as a result of generous funding from notable institutions, such as: *Goethe Institute*, *Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen e.V.*, *Deutscher Musikrat*, the Municipal Cultural Office of Cologne, *NRW KULTURsekretariat*, *Kunststiftung NRW*, *Stiftung Kunstfonds Bonn*, the Premier of North Rhine-Westphalia and *SK-Stiftung Kultur*, Cologne.

In addition to being resident at the *Stadtgarten* in Cologne, these cooperations have enabled the festival to participate in festivals such as the *Musik Triennale* Cologne, *Moers Festival*, *altstadtherbst kulturfestival* in Düsseldorf, *Beethoven Festival* in Bonn, *Mex* at the Künstlerhaus Dortmund, *Mediawave* Festival in Hungary and the *Get It Louder* Festival in Beijing and Shanghai.

The close proximity of the Academy of Media Arts to the University of Music in Cologne resulted in a unique collaboration with *Frischzelle*, through which each of the institutions could show off their potential and traditions to their best advantage.

As an innovative festival, breaking new ground in the field of artistic expression, *Frischzelle* enables the University of Music to draw on the great tradition of New Music and improvised music in Cologne, represented by figures such as Herbert Eimert, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Mauricio Kagel or Alex von Schlippenbach. In the same way, the *Frischzelle* participation of the Academy of Media Art reflects the traditions of technology or media based art, as, for example, epitomised by Nam Jun Paik in the Rhineland.

Frischzelle Highlights /

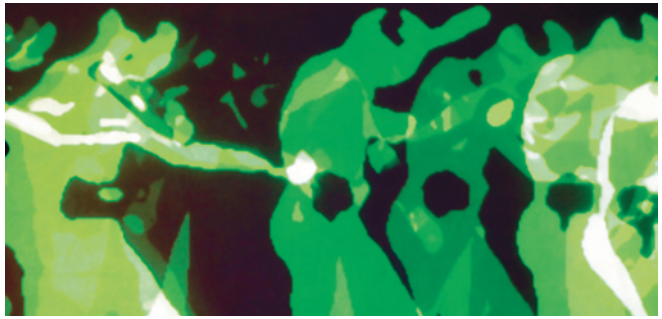
Holger Förterer (Video)

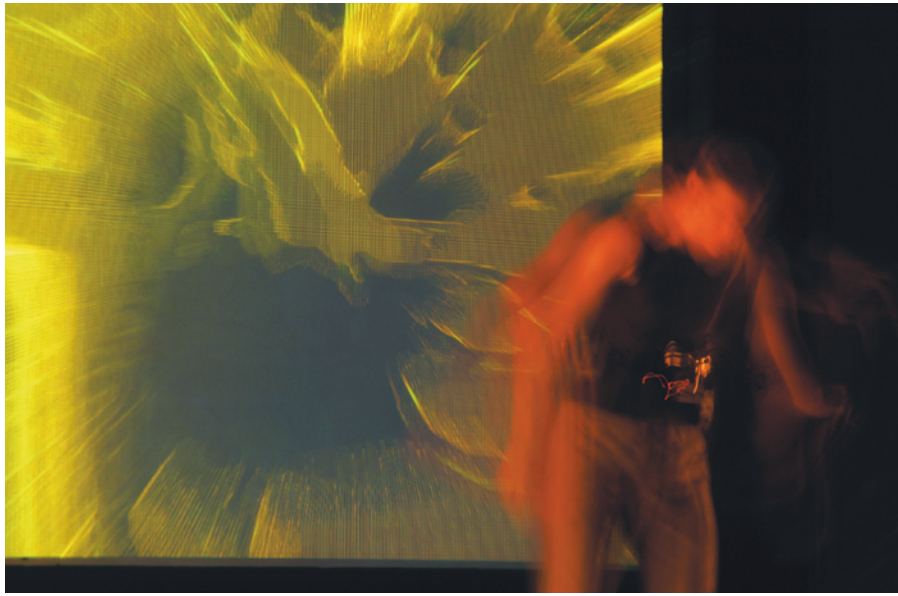
Sebastian Weber (Dance)

Robert Wieczorek (Film)

In their performance at *Frischzelle* 2006, Holger Förterer, Sebastian Weber and Robert Wieczorek combined video art and tap-dancing in a unique manner. A self-made interface correlated information of Weber's movements while tap-dancing, detected by pressure sensors, with the transformation of a video image. Additionally, an infrared camera recorded the dancer's silhouette, which then was transformed into atmospheric black and white images that were used to overlay other images, such as video footage supplied by Robert Wieczorek, and then atomised into fog-like clouds of particles by Förterer with the help of a computer.

Sebastian Weber's tap-dancing provided an additional acoustic dimension. With the aid of complex audio coding the percussive sounds of his shoes were transformed into atonal clusters, repetitive patterns and chordal sound tapestries.





Sebastian Weber, Holger Förterer, photo: Nadine Minkwitz

EPG mouth interface Marek Goldowski

Light sensors, Nathalie Bewernitz

Nathalie Bewernitz (Light Interface)

Marek Goldowski (Mouth Interface)

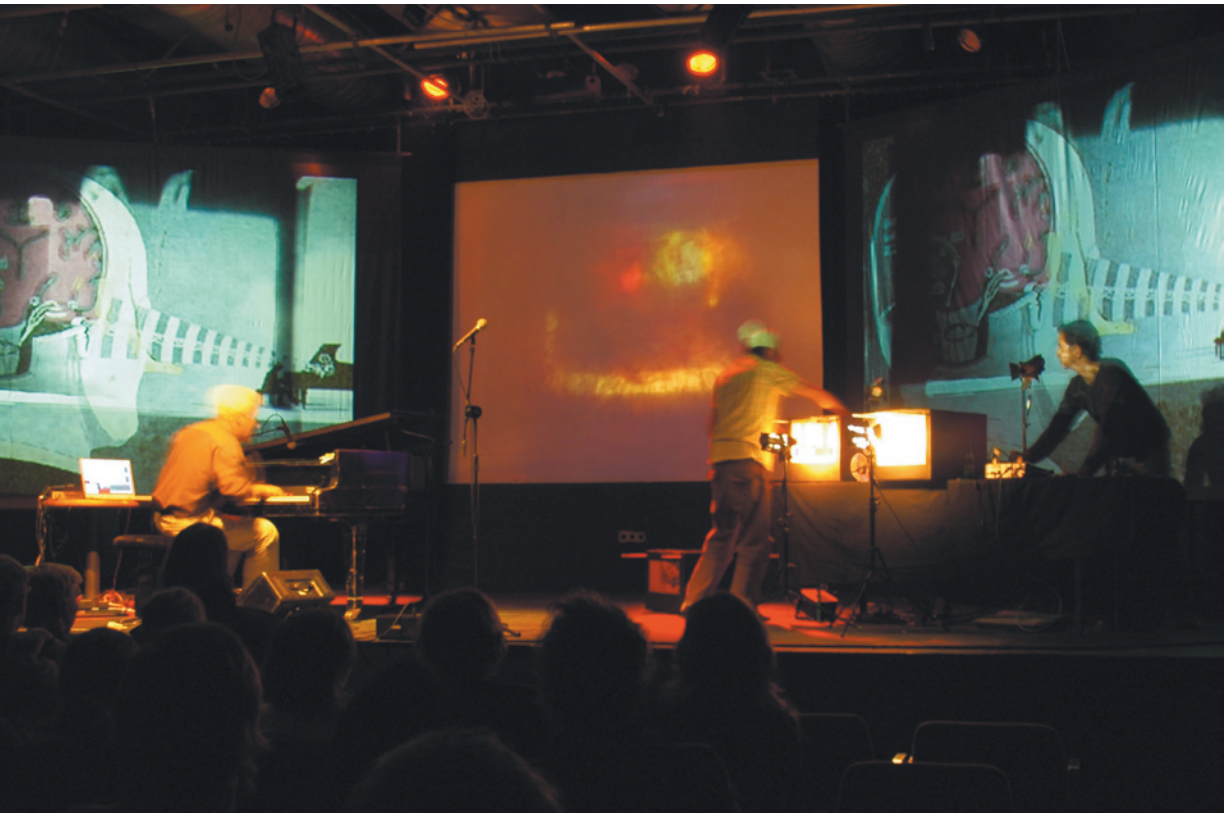
Simon Rummel (Piano)

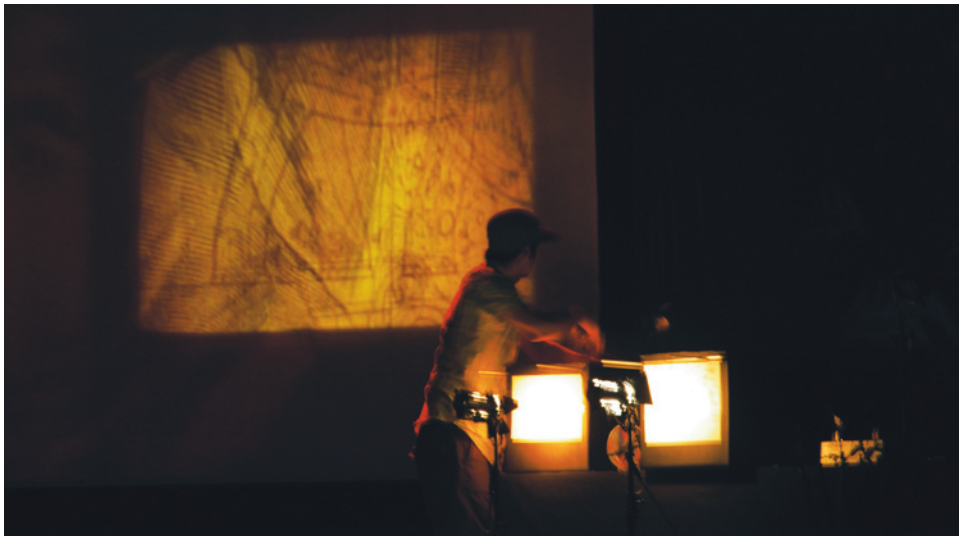
A piece for three performers, three pianos, a mouth and lightinterface.

In the joint performance Marek Goldowski used an electropalatograph (EPG), originally developed for phonetic research, as an interface for controlling MIDI devices. Goldowski sat motionless in a chair on stage with the *EPG* in his mouth, playing a MIDI grand piano solely by moving his tongue. Through his interface he was able to play grotesque tonal combinations and transpositions not realizable by hand.

Nathalie Bewernitz proceeded similarly: She played a sensor board fitted with numerous light sensors that was connected to a piano synthesizer. Unlike a conventional keyboard, the *keys* were positioned one above the other in several rows on an area no larger than 10 x 20 cm, so that even the subtlest movement of her fingers resulted in wild chord combinations and dense tonal clusters.
Simon Rummel performed as a *real* pianist – he skilfully assimilated, imitated and contrasted the strange aesthetic of both interface pianos.

Chris Brown, Juan Orozco, Luis Negron, photo: Nadine Minkwitz





Chris Brown (Piano, Computer)

Juan Orozco (Video)

Luis Negron (Video)

Chris Brown, one of the many international guests to *Frischzelle*, is a composer, pianist, programmer and tutor of electronic music at Mills College. With a specially developed interface he transfers the audio information from his grand piano to a computer, which, by means of neuronal coding, analyses the rhythmic and tonal structures of what he plays and logically continues the audio sequences. A reactive dialogue develops between the pianist and the program connected to his instrument.

Juan Orozco and Luis Negron visually accompanied Brown's concert at *Frischzelle*. The work of both artists is informed by the tradition of magical image-producing machines from the 17th Century. However, they merge their historic cinematographic settings with modern video and computer technology. This enables them to improvise with various picture elements, as one might with an electronic *Laterna Magica*. In so doing, both artists generate ghostly and bizarre images, which seem to emanate from our subconscious or dream world.

Early Winds /

Frischzelle 2007 under the banner of a German-Chinese cultural exchange

At present there is hardly any other country on earth, which is attracting as much attention to itself as China. The political changes at the end of the last century and the resulting rapid economic growth, which in just two decades have propelled China from the status of an agricultural to an industrial nation, are regarded worldwide with astonishment, but also with fear.

Suddenly, still nominally communist China has transformed into a country where the globalised capital market encounters early capitalist working conditions alongside optimal location factors. China is, or so it appears to be, an Eldorado for enterprises that require a significant allocation of human resources. China is both a blessing and a curse for the long-established industrial nations.

Philip Zoubek, Clayton Thomas, Carl Ludwig Hübsch, Zafka, Yan Jun, Gogo, photo: Thorsten Schneider

Top: Hannes Hölzl, Michael Thies, photo: Jin Xiao Hui, bottom: Michael Striepens

Left: 8GG, Lie Tiqiao, Chun Lee, photo by Thosten Schneider, right: *Nanoschlaf*, photo: Jin Xiao Hui

The conditions of production in the Middle Kingdom facilitate market prices that result in low priced consumer goods in other parts of the world; however, the methods used by China to acquire know-how, often in total violation of patent, license and branding laws, is a cause for concern for many companies. The way we view the cultural scene in China is equally ambivalent. It is with deep respect that we encounter the technological and artistic supremacy, which China's old cultures have possessed for centuries. To what extent does China draw on these traditions? What influence do the technological benefits of the consumer society and the resulting dissemination of Western mainstream have on China's cultural awareness?

For outsiders the cultural fusion of Chinese tradition and Western influence becomes most obvious in the visual arts. Owing to the capital of the new business elite in China and of Western collectors, the Chinese art market has boomed beyond belief. Admittedly this art market provides insight into a very limited section of Chinese art production, the authenticity of which often seems dubious because of the market mechanisms of supply and demand. It is a credit to Zeitkunst e.V. that, with *Frischzelle / Early Winds*, they were able to provide an entirely different insight into China's contemporary art scene. Espacially due to the the work of media artist Echo Ho, as part of the *Early Winds* artistic director team, it was possible to invite 35 musicians and media

Lie Tiqiao, top: Shenggy, photo: Thorsten Schneider, bottom: Wu Na, photo: Jin Xiao Hui

Michael Thies, Hannes Hölzl, Philip Zoubek, Christian Thomé, Zafka, Gogo, photo: Jin Xiao Hui

artists from Beijing to the festival, in addition to musicians from Cologne and neighbouring countries. Among the Chinese guests were, for example, the sound artist Shenggy, who has previously worked with big names such as Elliot Sharp and Blixa Bargeld or the laptop musician Zhang Jian, who, as part of the duo *FM3*, caused an international furore with the *Buddha Machine*, an electronic sound sculpture based on an Asian prayer mill.

As in the previous *Frischzelle* festivals the computer functioned once again as a link that facilitated cultural dialogue, for despite cultural differences many of the invited guests worked with similar technology.

Even now media art scenes are developing in Shanghai and Beijing which are comparable to those in Europe and America and which there has been little interaction, up until now.

Since 2004, for example, the *Get it Louder* Festival, has taken place in Shanghai, Beijing, Guanzhou and Chendu. With support from the British Council, the newest developments in design, media art and experimental music are presented here. One distinctive feature of *Frischzelle* 2007 was that the concerts that took place in Cologne, Bonn, Düsseldorf and Dortmund were preceded by concerts in China.

Philip Zoubek, Clayton Thomas, Gogo, photo: Thorsten Schneider

In August 2007, eight German musicians from *Frischzelle / Early Winds* played at the *Get it Louder* festival: at *South Gate Space*, located in the now renowned *798 Art District* in Beijing; in the *4Live* Club in Shanghai; and in a private apartment in Zhu Jia Jiao, a small village about an hour by car from Shanghai.

The concerts in China were followed by the regular festival evenings in Germany with events at the *Stadtgarten* in Cologne, *altstadtherbst kulturfestival* in Düsseldorf and for the first time at *mex – experimental and intermedial musicprojects e.V.* in Dortmund. With a total of six different events, three of which took place in China and three in Germany, *Frischzelle / Early Winds* initiated an exchange with the Chinese music and media art scene, which was dominated by an atmosphere of mutual fascination and good rapport.

In so doing the *Frischzelle / Early Winds* laid the foundations for continuing links, which will undoubtedly result in future exchanges between contemporary Chinese and German artists and musicians.

Between Tradition and Turbo-Capitalism

Through Frischzelle / Early Winds*, artists and musicians from Europe met with their colleagues from China. Without Echo Ho´s participation in the* Early Winds *artistic director team and her connections to the art and music scene in Beijing, this German-Chinese artistic dialogue would not have been possible. Echo Ho was born in Beijing and has lived in Cologne since 1998. Hubert Steins spoke with Echo Ho about her old home and the story behind* Early Winds.

Hubert Steins: Echo Ho, you have lived and worked in Cologne for many years and currently hold an artistic and academic position at the Academy of Media Arts. What areas did you work in prior to coming to Cologne?

Echo Ho: I studied painting at an art academy and then studied Film and Television in Hong Kong. I came to the Academy of Media Arts as a student in 1998. I have worked in Cologne with video and sound, but also with performance and dance. I started working with improvised electronic music in 2001, and together with Hannes Hölzl founded the duo *earweego*.

Video still from the installation *Immemorial Heterotopia* by Echo Ho

H.S.: Do you have much contact with your country these days?

E.H.: As a result of several projects that took place between 2004 to 2007, contact has increased again. The federal arts council also helped this along by initiating the artist exchange programme *Peking Case*, which consists of a four-month scholarship to Beijing, and a solo exhibition both in Beijing and at the *ZKM* (Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe). This gave me the opportunity to re-establish contact with China. I was there for four months, working in the art scene and got to know a lot of people.

H.S.: Thanks to your connection to China, Chinese musicians and media artists were brought together with european musicians and media artists. Concerts were organized in China, and later in Cologne, Düsseldorf and Dortmund. What was the setting for the *Frischzelle* concerts in China?

E.H.: The concerts took place at an event called *Get it Louder*. This is an international biennale for design and art that also hosts concerts. Part of the concept is to stage many concerts using smaller venues. This could be in a private apartment or even a taxi. *Frischzelle*, however, was provided a larger stage. In August 2007, the German musicians held solo concerts in Shanghai and there were concerts in Beijing.

H.S.: China is a country that is currently experiencing significant economic and cultural change. How does the generation that experienced communism in its pure form deal with the impact of Western culture today?

E.H.: There is a Chinese saying, which literally means that the next generation comes every four years. In Germany, this notion is defined completely differently. In China, however, there has always been rapid change. Following the Cultural Revolution, a huge rift between tradition and modernity developed, and the cultural elite were confronted by a huge void and they weren't sure how to assimilate the last 10 years and how to bridge the gap to traditional culture. Then at the beginning of the 80's, the economic reform came along with Deng Xiaoping's decision to open up China's economy. Prior to that there had already been important internal reforms. Suddenly people were allowed to speak about money and affluence again. And it was this first wave in the 80's, which spurred on a materialistic way of thinking, but which also provided the people with the possibility to be more independent. Of course this progress was also apparent in the arts.

H.S.: In which areas of Chinese society is the influence of the West most obvious?

E.H.: With the opening of the market and the increased availability of goods on the black market. For example, pop music arrived, in particular rock and roll and music from the 60's and 70's, all that hippy stuff. That's what came first. There weren't any punks yet. Needless to say, that all came along 20 years late. However, the music has the same social effect as it has on all young people. It's a way of expressing an attitude towards life here too.

H.S.: What kinds of Western music can be found in China? Besides pop, do people also appreciate classical and avant-garde music?

E.H.: Western classical music is extremely widespread in China. The people value it more than their own traditional music. Since the 80's, affluent parents have given their children music lessons in Western instruments. Piano and violin are the most popular instruments in China. People also listen to classical music. It is more popular than the traditional music of China. And with avant-garde music, it is much the same as in other places – the circle is very small. If anything, China was first exposed to avant-garde music in the 90's, or perhaps later, at the start of the new century.

Video still from the performance *What is Singing*, Echo Ho, Hannes Hölzl, Wu Na, Yoshie Shibahara, 2007

H.S.: In what way are the changes to social and community life obvious?

E.H.: Life in China has not necessarily become more difficult; however, people are more concerned about themselves and their own egos. Then there's the one-child-policy, which was introduced at the beginning of the 80's, with the consequence that the universe only rotates around one sun. And the result is an extremely egocentric generation, which is around ten years younger than me.

Audiovisual concert, *Make Art* Festival France 2006, Echo Ho, Hannes Hölzl

Family values have been severely undermined as a result of this system. People don't behave as part of a collective anymore, and yet they are still part of a collective because the propaganda has not changed. The belief that there is one dream for all the people in China, even when there are so many of us, is still easily exploited as propaganda. And the big promises of harmony, peace and prosperity in China are easily disseminated.

H.S.: You just spoke about the importance of Western pop music for the young people. What role does the traditional art of China play these days?

E.H.: Naturally a lot was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, art was always very cleverly used as propaganda during communism. For example, the old music continued to be played, however, in other contexts. The fact that traditional culture and customs are being rediscovered today is actually a result of the economic reform; China now has economic reserves and suddenly money is available, which can finally be used to make changes. A lot has changed over the last ten years in this respect. You just have to look at Joseph Needham, who undertook extensive research on technology and civilization in old China. It has been a great help for China to be able to revisit its own history.

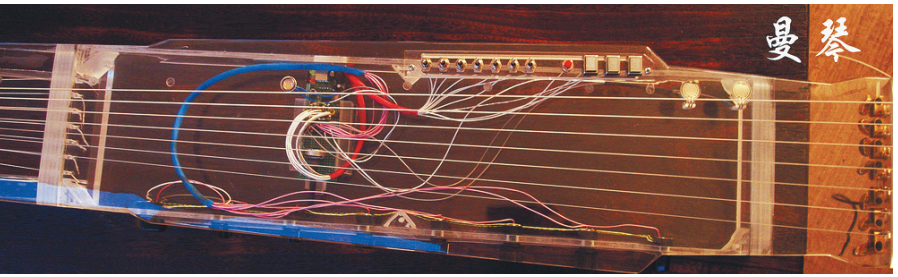
H.S.: We saw some musicians at *Frischzelle / Early Winds*, whose work has close ties to punk, noise and electronic music. Are such artists able to follow their interests freely or is this kind of music considered to be subversive?

E.H.: I have the impression that they are very free. But these young people are not socially critical or politically engaged. They are more like defiant children who totally let themselves go. This is a very personal form of protest against society. But it doesn't have any political impact. For example, punk is not as political in China; at least not to the same extent as it was in Europe.

H.S.: Punk, industrial and noise music are very specific trends of the Western underground culture. How authentic are these trends in China?

E.H.: If you look at it from an outsider's perspective, you quickly get the impression that it's all imported from, and imitating the West. But in fact all common computer tools produce a very similar musical aesthetic. And China provides an optimal setting for producing something like noise music. Anyone who's ever been to a Chinese city will know that sometimes it's just not possible to escape the noise. Therefore, if you're travelling around with a recording device, you can collect a lot of material for noise music. In the West, this type of music is considered to be conceptual. In China, however, it is life. Young people are open to things like that. In Germany, it took some years for the public to get used to it.

Video still from the performance *What is Singing*, Echo Ho, Hannes Hölzl, Wu Na, Yoshie Shibahara, 2007



Fiberglas gu qin, Echo Ho, 2007

You can also find a lot of information about noise in old music texts. Noise has always been a part of Chinese music. Interestingly, this is no longer common knowledge, as it has been omitted from music education. Presumably we didn't have music schools or academies or conservatoriums before. Conservatoriums and academies are institutions from the West and from Russia, and therefore a lot of important things about our tradition have faded into obscurity. If you observe the way the Gu Qin is played, then you will notice that the entire wooden frame doubles as a sound body, for example, by rubbing or hitting it. This is not a new way of playing, but rather one that has always existed, as these sounds are very similar to those found in nature. But that is no longer a part of music education in China.

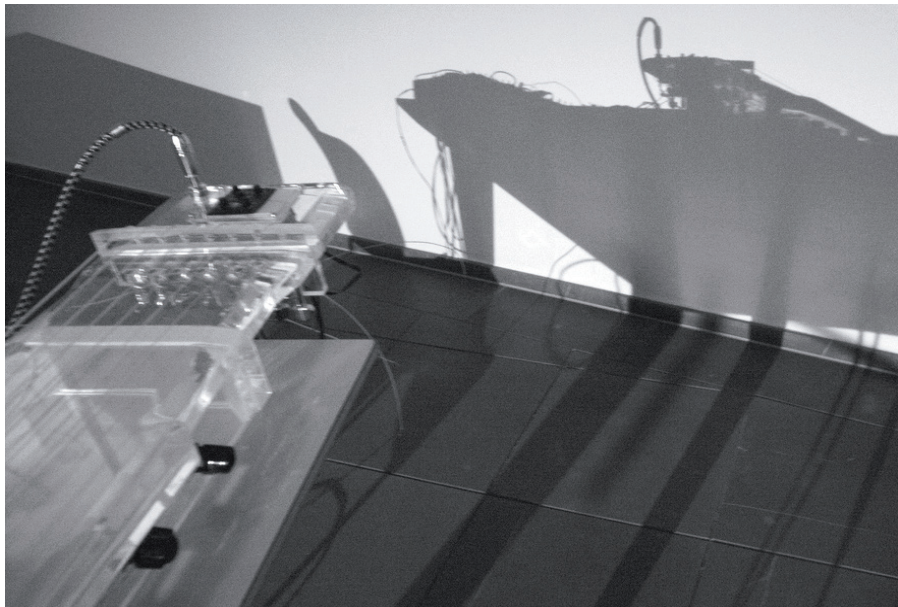
H.S.: At *Frischzelle / Early Winds*, Chinese artists and musicians played together with their European colleagues. How did they react to one another? Were there any surprises?

E.H.: With regards to the Gu Zheng, there were different reactions from the Western and from the Chinese perspective. The German musicians thought that the Gu Zheng player was an incredibly good improviser and really liked the way she played and danced. In contrast, the Chinese participants didn't like it at all. They did, however, admit that she was a good improviser, but thought that even though she played a Chinese instrument; she did so in a Western way. The Western members of the audience believed that they were experiencing the energy of another culture and that certain gestures were derived from Chinese culture. On the contrary, some of the Chinese felt that a Western import had been merely combined with traditional instruments. My feeling is that there was some inner resistance at play.

H.S.: In what way is improvisation connected to Chinese music?

E.H.: In the true sense of the word, improvisation doesn't exist but interpretation does. Musical works were once handed down through oral tradition. There was a master who played with his students. And then there were notations, which determined either the rhythm or the melody. That means that the remainder had to be interpreted, partly with the explicit instruction of interpreting the music with respect to the mood and state of mind of each individual musician. This is very similar to jazz: It has its own repertoire and musicians team up with other musicians to play this or that piece in their own unique way. Chinese music also has a repertoire that can be very freely interpreted. However, in Chinese music there are no completely free improvisations without notes. Wu Na graduated as the first post-graduate of Qin studies under Li Xiang Ting. He is literally the only one currently teaching the Improvisation course.

Fiberglas gu qin, Echo Ho, 2007



Yan Jun, Frank Gratkowski, Echo Ho, Hannes Hölzl, photo: Thorsten Schneider

H.S.: *Frischzelle* is a festival for intermedial improvisation and that means that media art is automatically included. Does China have an academic infrastructure for media art and electronic music?

E.H.: Surprisingly, in the meantime almost every art academy has its own multimedia department; the students don't work as freely as they do in Europe though, most of their projects are practical. Unlike in Europe, people are very open to all the fast technological developments. Every new piece of equipment is immediately taken on board. If a school is well equipped, the students are able to work with the latest equipment as for example in the China Academy of Fine Arts Hang Zhou. It is equipped with HD cameras and *Macintosh* computers. I don't know how these things are financed.
On the other hand, the schools have been privatized for the last ten years, which means that the students pay a high tuition fees, much higher than those recently introduced in Germany. This school is a good example. They even have their own sound festival. The artists who work there as university lecturers, are usually practicing artists from the scene. We got to know some of them and played with them in Shanghai. They all hold positions as guest lecturers. That naturally ensures that they keep in touch with the scene.

H.S.: Chinese art is currently taking off in the international art market. Does media art play a substantial role in China?

E.H.: No. Media art is not rated highly on the art market. Artists are able to realise works, however but it doesn't mean anything to the market as only painting sells well. Many artists, who occasionally work with media art, are going back to painting. However, there is a media art scene that is independent of the market and there are also some artists who successfully sell their video art.

Child playing, photo: Echo Ho

Earweego at *4Live* Club Shanghai, photo: Jin Xiao Hui

H.S.: Does the art scene in China tend to profit more from the international market or from the domestic market?

E.H.: The market profits mostly from international sales. The art market in China is still developing. It didn't exist previously. Now there are more affluent people, who can afford such things. As a result there are now young art critics who write and publish magazines. It's the same as in the West. I believe that this is a really positive step forward because there is now art criticism which questions artistic production.

H.S.: You have been running an exhibition space in Beijing yourself since Autumn, 2007. How did you arrive at the decision to work in Beijing?

E.H.: It was a spontaneous decision. Prior to *Frischzelle* 2007, I took part in a two-week project together with Hannes Hölzl, Wu Na, the Chinese painter Yang Fei and the Japanese dancer Yoshie Shibahara, in a space that is very close to the Wu Na's Gu Qin school near Kings Park. When we got back to Cologne, we thought about renting a room as a studio space and showroom for future exchanges and networking projects between Cologne and Beijing. That's why we called the room *ABC*, which stands for *Atelier Beijing-Cologne*.

The studio is on the outskirts, about three kilometres from *Art District 798*, which is where *Frischzelle* also took place. A new art district is developing there parallel to *798*, which is now completely commercialised. This means that a lot of things are now moving to the outskirts. There is a very quiet, untouched old railway property there, and artists have moved in and established studio spaces as it is an ideal location to produce art. Later on galleries will move in too. That will probably be the second stage of development on site. We want to use the space as a studio and as a place for our network to meet. We want to give European artists the chance to have somewhere to stay and work in China. The space will also operate as a non-commercial showroom. But it's not going to have anything to do with selling art.

RE-INVENT

Musician and sound-artist Yan Jun, well known as music critic, poet and organizer in China's music and sub-culture scene, was co-organizer and one of the Early Winds *artists. As label owner of* Waterland Kwanyin *and* Sub Jam *as well as organizer of the weekly experimental improvisation concerts at* Dos Kollegas *club, he is one of the most active members in Beijings avant-garde art scene. In this article he writes about the history and development of experimental and electronic music in China as he experienced it.*

In 1996, the pioneering experimental musician Wang Fan decided to move from Lanzhou to Beijing in the hope of finding artists with the same ideas and goals as himself, or at least musicians who were able to share his ideas and understand and perform his works. In Lanzhou, he only encountered musicians playing blues or thrash metal. The most radical acts on the music scene were bands covering *Radiohead* songs, and only one person knew the name of the American experimental musician John Zorn.

Wang Fan, photo: Liao Weitang

However, it turned out that Beijing was not overrun with the *weird* people he was looking for either. Wang Fan spent the following year alone in a friend's suburban apartment. There he created music with a guitar with loose strings, Coca-Cola cans, a television set and a household tape recorder. At that time he did not know of any other people who made music like this, so he invented his own way of playing. Both solitude and a sense of the mystical were necessary elements for the creation of his 40-minute long work *Dharma's Crossing*, which was regarded as the first experimental music work in China.

In China experimentation is taken literally – every single person in the entire country experiments daily and tries out new things. This is particularly true of the last decade. In pre-Olympic Beijing any street, building, restaurant, store, company or regulation could be transformed or even disappear at any given moment. The Nike advertising slogan *Everything Is Possible* reflects the spirit of these times.
During the previous Century, ongoing revolution and conflict in China brought with it a continuous process of transformation, innovation and experimentation. Following the civil war, the Cultural Revolution and radical economic restructures and reforms – e.g. the land reform, the language reform, the so-called *reform and open policy* – were implemented on a massive scale under the

banner of *advancing with the times*, substantially influencing the livelihood and thus the individual psychology and community culture of the Chinese people.

Contemporary culture is pervaded by the spirit to try out new and radical things, however *experimentation* has an undertone of political correctness. Despite the prevalence of conservative forces at work in China, it is clear that the fast rate of change taking place in the country reflects a desire and a vision for a new world.

Li Jianhong at Mini Midi 2008, photo: Wu Yi

The word *avant-garde*, among others, has become very fashionable. For example, a range of things, such as clothing, language, interior decoration, mobile phone design, etc., can be described as *avant-garde*. But only a few people know that avant-garde arts and avant-garde music are terms that have a 100-year old tradition. In Chinese, *avant-garde* is only ever used as an adjective; it is never a noun. All Chinese avant-garde musicians work in the field of experimental and free improvisation music.
All of ten musicians with whom I attended a symposium on free improvisation at the beginning of 2008, occasionally listened to the English avant-garde guitarist Derek Bailey, and understood that the Western definition of *free improvisation* refers to a strictly defined school (or new form). However, Chinese interpret the words *free* and *improvisation* in a literal sense and create freely and without restrictions. It is a spiritual process and has nothing to do with Western tradition.

In 1993 in Beijing, Zuoxiao Zuzhou (originally from Nanjing) formed the band *No*, one of the earliest underground rock bands in China. He developed a technique of playing in which he held the strings on his instrument with iron clips. This chaotic, discordant, and explosive style was later defined as *No Wave*. Wang Fan was also a member of the underground rock and roll scene. In fact, a lot of people were a part of this scene; anyone who was not in the underground rock scene or listening to rock music from a *Dakou* CD[1], watching pirated VCD movies, getting drunk, or reading the works of the Beat Generation during the nineties, probably belonged to the boring, materialistic part of society – a *grown-up* world with no dreams and imagination whatsoever. All the earliest experimental, noise, electronica and free improvisation musicians originated from this scene. It was a dejected, rebellious scene searching for a radical and very loud mode of expression.

By the end of the 20th century, increasing numbers became dissatisfied with rock 'n' roll. Some had heard of *Keiji Haino*, *Boredoms* and *Painkiller*; many had heard of *Sonic Youth* and *Prodigy*; only a few people were familiar with the names Albert Ayler and Karlheinz Stockhausen, but this did not stop them from *inventing* what they needed. Li Jianhong from Hangzhou, the Noise Association of Lanzhou, Zhou Pei (aka Ronez) from Guilin, Huanqing from Chengdu and Zhou Risheng from Datong, all began to experiment in a similar way. Wang Fan, however, was still the most original. He was the first to start creating pure noise and sine wave music without

1. Dakou: during the nineties, 95% of all Western music CDs and cassettes available on the Mainland were *Dakou* (translated as *saw-gash* in English). In order to save money, large Western (American) music distributors gashed surplus stock with an electric saw to render it *destroyed* for legal reasons. These damaged CDs and cassettes were then sold as plastic garbage to recycling companies in Asia. Many of the CDs, however, landed on the Chinese market. Due to increased piracy and the advent of MP3-technology, the number of *Dakou* has gradually declined since 2000. The Chinese government, however, still imposes strict controls on the import of audio and video products.

Album *you know where the east is* by Zuoxiao Zuzhou

knowing that other people had been doing this for a long time. He often came to me to discuss how to name the new sound he had just invented. In 2002, when Li Jianhong (whose influences included *Sonic Youth* and *Keiji Haino*) created noise with a collection of electric saws, machines and pedals, he was shocked by the result and that it was possible to create music in this way!

Electronic music (in Chinese Dian Zi Yue) is another branch of underground rock. In 1997, Feng Jiangzhou (who was influenced by *Alec Empire* and who was the leading vocalist of another early underground rock band *The Fly*) started to experiment with hardcore techno. The result was a kind of rock music that was noisier and more original than either electronic music or electronica. Even techno and house entered into China's mainstream music scene as a revolutionary force in 1996. One has to keep in mind that China had no rock until 1986 and no punk until 1996. Electronic music already existed, but no one knew how to use vintage synthesizers; techno music also existed, but there were no clubs.

2. For more information on the concepts of electronic music (Dian Zi Yin Yue and Dian Zi Yue) in Mainland China, please refer to the following article written by the author: *More Nonsense - A Brief History of Chinese Electronic Music* in In Music 2008, issue 1-4.

In order to clarify the terminology used: *Dian Zi Yue* refers to non-academic, popular, independent and experimental electronic music. However, *Dian Zi Yin Yue* – which on most occasions is more serious and formal than *Dian Zi Yue* – refers to academically styled electro-acoustic music[2]. Its origins date back to 1984, and it was first taught in 1986.
In the closed authoritarian system that prevailed in China, electro-acoustic music was studied for purely academic reasons and for the purpose of proving that the Chinese were not trailing behind the Western world; it had the dual function of exploring traditional philosophy and singing nationalistic praise. Even today, only a very small number of people have the opportunity to study in this field. In recent years, in addition to the main music academies, a large number of universities have initiated digital and media art courses, but unfortunately there are very few practitioners who can teach digital sound processing, algorithmic composition, or popular music-software.

Ji Mu (aka Jiang Zhuyun), another artist from Hangzhou, started making noise in 2002. Because he was so young, he worked at home instead of entering the music scene. At the time, Ji Mu thought he was the only person doing this in China. Ji Mu is now regarded as one of the *Second Generation*: a group of young musicians with almost no band experience, who use software to

create their work. He graduated from the Chinese Academy of Arts in 2007. His slightly older contemporaries – Wang Changcun from Daqing, Xu Cheng (*Torturing Nurse*) from Shanghai, Jin Shan and Chen Wei from Hangzhou, Yang Tao from Lanzhou (who was briefly involved with punk music), Zhong Minjie from Guangzhou, and Lin Zhiying from Shenzhen – are referred to as the *Download Generation*. They downloaded MP3s, cracked software and AV movies, along with a range of other information from the Internet, which was once so difficult to access. Because of a lack of interest in musical instruments, they quickly became the true pioneers of pure sound and the first genuine sound artists in China[3].

Zafka

Between 2002 and 2004, the number of people using broadband in China increased by over ten million. The Internet, however, had already had a huge impact on many people's lives prior to this great transformation. In 1998, Taiwanese-born Dajuin Yao, a music critic, computer musician and sound artist, who at the time was living in Berkeley, US, founded an Internet radio at sinologic.com; this greatly influenced new Chinese music. It was here that the *Second Generation* began to get in touch with various genres of non-conventional music.

3. For more information on the early development of sound art in Mainland China, please refer to the following article written by the author: "Background - Sound Art in China" in Avant-Garde Today, issue 14. The same article has been released on CD by KwanYin Records.

If it can be said that the *Dakou Generation* created music intuitively and on a spiritual level because they lacked a systematic knowledge of Western music, then it can also be said that Dajuin Yao was responsible for introducing a broader musical experience based on rationality and aesthetics. A scene, which could only exist on the Internet, was silently born; the new possibilities provided by software enabled the younger generation of untrained autodidacts to master a new world.

In 2003, Dajuin Yao curated *Sounding Beijing*, International electronic music festival. This festival brought top international artists and new skills to China for the first time, and simultaneously put young Chinese artists on the international scene. More importantly, however, it gave noise credibility in Beijing's young cultural scene.

In the same year, Li Jianhong held the first *2pi Festival* in Hangzhou, which focussed on noise-rock, avant-rock and noise. This festival found a way to revive the dying underground rock scene – with more noise and bolder experimentation. *Torturing Nurse*, the acclaimed noise band from Shanghai, had not yet been formed; at that point in time, its main member *Junky* was the drummer of *Junkyard*, the most popular Japanese-style *No Wave* band at *2pi*. He has performed at *2pi* every year since its conception, but has never played the drums again. Instead, he now creates pure harsh noise and holds a monthly performance called *NOIShanghai* in Shanghai.

By 2005, the term *generation* could no longer be used as a criterion for classification. Zhang Anding (aka *Zafka*), who had previously played post-rock, had started experimenting with sound art. The new minimalist ambient band *FM3* invented their *Buddha Machine*. *8GG* had expanded their practice to include different artistic forms, such as video, sound, media art, interactive art and Internet art, since they first appeared at Sounding Beijing. The Gu Qin player Wu Na also arrived on the new music scene.

Feng Jiangzhou, flyer for the album *the fly >z*

A free weekly event *Waterland Kwanyin* was initiated in Beijing; it brought together a group of key figures from the cultural scene and established the trend of hosting social events based around noise.

Another festival, *Mini Midi*, was also founded in Beijing. This festival, which annually takes place on a small stage at the biggest rock festival in China (*Midi Music Festival*), embraces various kinds of sound ranging from indie electronica, to post-rock and laptop noise, and emphasises the relationship of avant-garde, experimental and improvisation music to rock music in China. The one piece of bad news was that China had lost its only free jazz musician Li Tieqiao when he moved to Norway.

At this time, China started to see an increasing number of independent labels, websites and small-scale events, as well as a growing number of international journalists and artists. Live shows were occasionally being performed in several of the major cities (mostly Beijing), and new artists, once they appeared on the scene, were exchanging ideas. Sound artists released a collection of field recording works and several artists were making installations and visual works. Further down the track, the municipal government of Shanghai established *Shanghai eArts* 2007, which was developed in cooperation with many major international academic partners including *Ars Electronica*.

Despite the fact that the upstart contemporary art scene of China had, up till now, shown little interest in sound art, both the government and capital investors were keen to come on board. The government has since established a fund to support the *creative cultural industry*, which is a first, as it has never before supported either the contemporary arts or youth culture. In 2008, China seems to be bursting with new energy. In comparison to Hong Kong and Taiwan, this *cultural explosion* on the mainland seems to be of greater significance.In the early nineties, when Li Chin Sung (*Dickson Dee*) entered the international music scene, independent music in Hong Kong experienced a brief boom. It was at this time that Li Chin Sung began to create industrial noise and experimental collage and in 1995 he released albums on John Zorn's *Tzadik* label. As the manager of a label himself, he was the first one to release an album for Otomo Yoshihide. In recent years, he has become an active laptop performer and is the only full-time artist in Hong Kong.

In comparison, Hong Kong artists, for example *Sin:Ned*, a Hong Kong music critic and *Alok*, the executive producer of *Lona Records*, typically create

electronic music and sound art in a rather low-key manner in their free time. On the other hand, the nineties noise artist *Xper. Xr.* who explored parody in his work, has left China altogether for London. Experimental electronic musicians who are more commonly known as pop musicians, such as *Simon Ho*, co-founder of *Oriental Electronic Orchestra* and ex-member of the indie-rock band *Midnight Flight*, rarely perform in public. The potential for Hong Kong's underground culture seems to be limited, but the amateur scene is thriving there more than anywhere else. Taiwan also entered the international noise scene in the nineties.

The noise activities of *Zero and Sound*, initiated by a student movement that was part of a larger social movement, were the most radical expressions of the concept of noise to date. A music fanzine about the underground noise movement called *NOISE*, which was founded by Fujui Wang, also released about a hundred albums and compilations featuring musicians from Japan and America. In the mid-nineties, the crazy, grass roots, radical noise scene had reached a climax, whereas experimental music, avant-garde music and improvisation had not yet advanced so far. It was about that time that *DINO*, a *Second Generation* noise musician, abandoned his rock band *The Clippers* to focus on hardware noise.

In recent years, Taiwan has changed its terminology: the term *noise* has been replaced by *sound art* – the once rebellious connotation has been replaced by associations of an elite culture association. The government, universities, and contemporary arts in general have had a simultaneous influence on the scene; on a socio-political level, all references to noise have been erased by the cultural policies of the government. Artists working in the contemporary arts have also started to explore the possibilities of sound; in fact, most of the young sound artists in Taiwan have come from the visual arts. Finally, bands such as *Goodbye Nao!* and others have been instrumental in developing the experimental music scene in Taiwan with their own eclectic style – a unique blend of post-rock and John Cage.

The story of *RE-INVENT* is complex. Westerners deconstruct their own traditions in order to redefine them, whereas the Chinese simultaneously attempt to understand the Western tradition and to rediscover their own. While Westerners believe that the Chinese are re-inventing sounds that already exist, the Chinese believe that they are simply re-inventing themselves.

written by Yan Jun
translated by Wei Xiaojing
edited by Melita Dahl & Joanne Moar

The Improvised Moving Image

As a festival for intermedial improvisation with the objective of uniting acoustic and visual media through improvisation, *Frischzelle* has become an important part of the Cologne festival scene over the last five years. To this end, *Frischzelle* draws on the potential of a lively scene of jazz improvisation and new music, as well as media artists who work both visually and acoustically with computer-aided technologies. The *Frischzelle* objectives could not have been achieved without this new breed of intermedia artist.

The significance of the present-day intermedia artist, in turn, is owed to the rapid ongoing developments in computer technology, which, at the end of the 1990s, contributed to the availability of systems that were both affordable and powerful enough for real-time image processing. Due to insufficient CPU performance, the capabilities of computerised image processing lagged behind those of electronic and computerised sound processing for a long time. It wasn't until the mid 1990's with the increase of universal sound software, that the real-time processing of images could be executed with ease.

Intermedial improvisation, an impromptu blending of improvised music with images that are spontaneously arranged and processed, is therefore undoubtedly a relatively new artistic form. Nevertheless, this multimedial practice has its roots in numerous art historical traditions.

The abstract interplay of music and image

The *Frischzelle* festival combines freely improvised music with the fast-growing potential of new controllers and interfaces in the area of improvised image generation and transformation. This is certainly an unusual way of combining music and image; typically, when the two are combined, a hierarchical structure eventuates, in which music plays a supporting role. This role, established by the aesthetic illusion predominant in sound films, is of a psychological and emotional nature; it highlights the dramatic potential of the narrative by using music and sound in a formulaic and sometimes stereotyped way to evoke emotion and create pathos. It seems to be the mainstream-influenced visual and auditory habits of the *listening audience* that are most challenged by the freely composed audio/visual experiments at *Frischzelle*. Here the audience is presented with associative auditory and visual spaces, which are first made complete by the individual's own interpretation.

Film and video are presented here as a kind of abstract *digital* painting that unfolds in time, or as associatively transformed and edited footage. The conventional function of the moving image – the linear narrative or documentary known from film and television – is irrelevant here. Instead, experiments with new algorithms for image transformation and techniques in video editing and montage explore the capabilities of technological systems — particularly how to best respond spontaneously to the musical performance. These experiments, in part simple and yet quite innovative, are aimed at finding ways of implementing new media technologies artistically and thereby confronting us with new, unfamiliar visual outcomes.

It is through this exploration of the latest technological capabilities that the *Frischzelle* artists have become pioneers in their field – comparable to the film pioneers of the 1920's and 1930's – and whose work builds upon the aesthetic parameters established by these historical precursors. This can be seen for example, in their rejection of the abject synchronicity of image and sound; a measure called for by Sergei Eisenstein in his theory of conflict, which had its roots in visual montage. Eisenstein scorned illusionism in both theatre and film and considered film to be a new, independent art form, in which illusionistic accounts of reality were to be avoided at all costs.

This new cinematic reality was to be created by editing together incongruous images. With the advent of sound in film, Eisenstein extended this dialectical theory of conflict to include the interaction of image and sound. In his *Statement* about the future of film sound, drawn up with Vsevolod Pudovkin and Grigori Aleksandrov in 1928, he states that sound in film should have its own independent language, because a new *orchestral counterpoint* between visual and acoustic elements can only be achieved through a jarring dissonance between film and sound montage. The revision of their theory to include sound was the Soviet Russian filmmaker's response to the era of the commercial sound film. This new era – heralded by the film *The Jazz Singer* (1927) – posed a threat to the Russian cinematic arts, as it did not yet dispose of a satisfactory synchronisation technology.

In a script from Old and New, a later version of his never-completed sound film *The General Line* (1929), Eisenstein describes acoustic metamorphoses, which were not technically possible at that time, but which, according to how he conceived them, were ahead of their time. The first opportunity he had to implement these ideas was in 1930 when he produced his film *Romance Sentimentale* in Europe. Eisenstein used techniques such as drawing *sound* directly onto the optical track and manipulation of recorded sound – playing back recordings faster, slower or even backwards – long before comparable techniques were used in Disney productions. Later, however, he distanced himself from *Romance Sentimentale* because the project was a complete failure. It wasn't until the film production Alexander Nevsky in 1939 that he worked with sound again; however, at this point in time, the political climate no longer allowed for experiments.

Similar approaches to sound were implemented in Vsevolod Pudovkin's film *The Deserter*, which was completed in 1933. Pudovkin was strongly influenced by Walter Ruttmann's experimental sound play *Weekend*. Because he considered image and sound to be autonomous, rhythmic layers, many parts of the soundtrack of *The Deserter* can exist independently of the cinematic image as futuristic noise music.

Walter Ruttmann, video still from *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City*, 1927

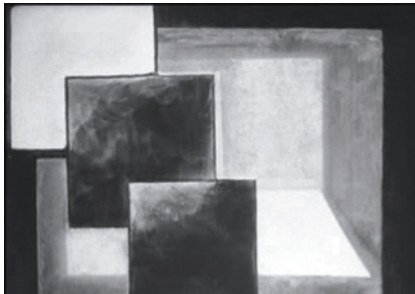
Walter Ruttmann, who became a late-discovered pioneer of acoustic montage with the production of his experimental sound play Weekend in 1930, was in turn influenced by the aesthetics of the Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov. With his documentary film *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City* (1927) he abandoned his former purely abstract and experimental approach to film making. The dynamic hustle and bustle of the big city fascinated Ruttmann, as it had fascinated the Futurists fifteen years previously. As a result, he portrayed Berlin almost entirely in terms of kinetic energy.

His documentary cross-section of a day in a metropolis is determined to a large extent by the tempo and rhythm of everyday urban life: From unhurried early-morning activities and the gradual filling up of the streets, to the start of a typical factory workday and the slowing down of the urban activity at the end of the day. For the film *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City*, Edmund Meisel composed orchestral music, which loosely corresponded to the rhythmic pulsating of the film images, but which was more often contrapuntal to these. Ruttmann, who played the Cello in his youth, worked so closely with the composer, that Meisel retrospectively commented that music and image were coupled right from the start of film production.

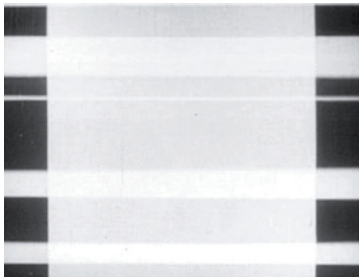
Walter Ruttmann, video still from *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City*, 1927

This homogeneity of the moving image and music was already apparent in Ruttmann's abstract animation *Opus III*, which Hans Eisler composed the music for in 1927. Apart from Oskar Fischinger's animated films, Ruttmann's *Opus III* is undoubtedly one of the most successful experiments to visualise musical ideas of form by means of abstract animation. Unlike Fischinger, however, whose films were usually accompanied by jazz-inspired easy listening or classical music, in Ruttmann's works there was a closer relationship to the experimental music of the time.

Both Ruttmann and Fischinger made use of musical ideas of form in their films, in order to incorporate cubist and constructivist theories of both perceptual and Gestalt psychology in the moving image, as described by Kandinsky in his Bauhaus treatise *Point and Line to Plane* from 1926. Some of their cinematic experiments, however, dealt with issues that were well ahead of their time; for example, they explored visual phenomena that first became popular through Op art and computer graphics after the Second World War.

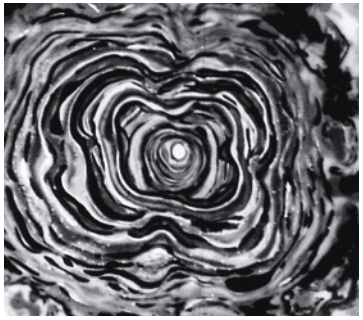


Walter Ruttmann, video still from *Opus III*, 1927



Walter Ruttmann, video still from *Opus IV*, 1927

Opus IV, a film produced by Walter Ruttmann in 1925, is an abstract study of black and white stripes as they move horizontally and overlap. The rhythmic, repetitive composition of extreme light and dark contrasts vibrate in the viewer's eye; this effect reappeared more than forty years later in Tony Conrad's experimental film *The Flicker* (1965). Similarly, Oskar Fischinger's experimental film entitled *Spirals*, produced between 1924 and 1926, was precursory to the exploration of moiré patterns yet to come. Optical illusions and space-distorting effects like this were not systematically studied until after the Second World War by the *Optical Art* movement and exponents of early computer graphics.



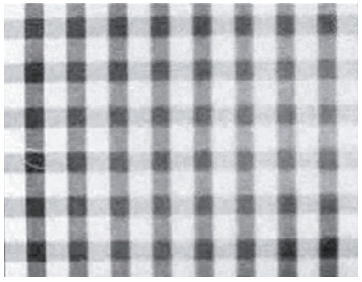
Oskar Fischinger, Wax Experiments, 1923-27

Also important to mention in this context are Fischinger's film experiments with melted wax, which were carried out between 1923 and 1927. These amorphous, cloudy, organically fluid structures, which convulsively mushroom from the centre of the image, presented a strong contrast to the constructivist's use of form and pre-empted the amorphous aesthetic of psychedelic art made popular by experimental films and theatre.

Psychedelic

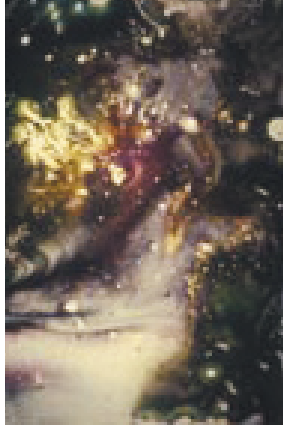
The abstract experimental films of Fischinger, Ruttmann and, of course, of pioneers such as Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter and László Moholy-Nagy, were groundbreaking for both art and commercial cinema. If Fischinger and Ruttmann are singled out here, it is because of the way they combined music and abstract image in their films. The combination of music and film was, needless to say, of a compositional nature. The improvisation of a film's sound and musical accompaniment was already standard practice in the time of the silent film; in contrast, the improvised montage of moving image was not yet technically possible. Isolated experiments with optomechanical devices, such as Wladimir Baranoff-Rossiné's optophonic piano, which he developed in the twenties, never caught on. Indeed the tradition of improvisation with music and moving image in combination does not have its roots in film, but rather in optomechanical projections, which were part of the mid 1960's psychedelic art movement in America and England.

About ten years after John Cage's legendary performance at the Black Mountain College in 1952 – generally considered to be the birth hour of the *Happening* – Morton Subotnick and Pauline Oliveros, together with the light artist Tony Martin, experimented at the San Francisco Tape Music Centre with various forms of multimedia performance, which incorporated freely-arranged compositions, experimental music theatre and moving light and slide projections. Tony Martin began working with projections of liquids and emulsion at the beginning of the 1960's.



Tony Conrad, video still from *The Flicker*, 1965

His light projections soon experienced great popularity outside of the San Francisco Tape Music Center in the psychedelic rock scene because the amorphous shapes he created, in their permanent state of movement and dissolution, perfectly complemented the excessive, prolonged improvisations of groups such as the *Grateful Dead* and *Jefferson Airplane*. Between 1965 and 1967 Martin performed numerous light shows in Bill Graham's Fillmore West Auditorium in San Francisco for bands such as *Jefferson Airplane*, *The Great Society*, *Grateful Dead*, Muddy Waters, *Them* and *The Mothers of Invention*. At the same time, the photographer John Hopkins established the psychedelic scene in London in his *UFO* Club, where bands like the *Soft Machine* and *Pink Floyd* performed.



Tony Martin, *Liquid Projection*, 1962

The combination of psychedelic music and experimental light shows became common practice here too. In-house artists at the *UFO* Club were the collaborative artists Marc Boyle and Joan Hill, who in their light shows experimented with the projection of boiling liquids e.g. body fluids such as saliva, sperm and urine, as well as the projection of flammable chemical compounds.
Just as highly charged, but somewhat more conceptual in form, were the events that Andy Warhol held at his *Factory* in New York. The media spectacle *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, documented by Ronald Nameth in 1966, combined performance, superimposed film projections and light effects with live music from the *Velvet Underground*. In contrast to the psychedelic concerts taking place on the West Coast of America which retained the frontal positioning of the stage, the happening *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* eliminated all boundaries between the audience and art.

It is no coincidence, however, that if one looks at Nameth's historical documentation from a contemporary perspective, it resembles footage from a discotheque. This impression is accentuated by the use of lighting effects, which are now a standard feature of any discotheque or pop concert. As on the West Coast of America, New York light-art – a spin off of the op art of the mid 1960's – also became a part of mainstream popular culture.

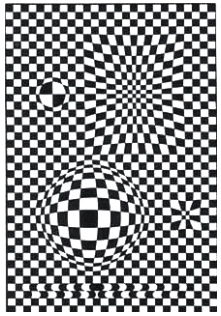
Op art

As a counter-movement to abstract expressionism and tachism and as technology-based art, Op art was, in many respects, relevant to the development of artistic practices of the kind that typically appear at *Frischzelle* today. For instance, as a technology-based art form, it influenced the development of computer graphics and computer-generated art. The rejection of artworks that carried a particular artist's signature was closely linked to an interest in technology-based image-creation, which involved precise systematic methods. By undermining the myth of the artist as genius, which at the time was cultivated by both abstract expressionism and tachism, Op art redefined the relationship between an artwork and its viewer to be that of the relationship between the object and the human eye. The static form of Op art therefore exploits the fallibility of visual perception.

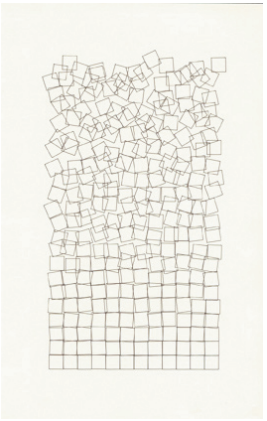
The precise systematic treatment of optical phenomena such as the after-image, consecutive movement, interference and moiré patterns in the works of Victor Vasarely or Bridget Riley, for example, is similar in structure to early forms of computer graphics. It was a logical step to formalise the production of these structures, dynamic in their repetitive quality and yet very minimalist in nature and to cede to mechanical production. In this way, a static art form, Op art, became the starting point of a generative aesthetic, which soon used algorithms to create works. By means of minimal black and white aesthetics and simple rules to generate aesthetic effects, early computer graphics – produced by artists such as François Morellet, Georg Nees, Erwin Steller and Manfred Mohr – continued the tradition of Op art with new tools.

Ronald Nameth, *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, 1966

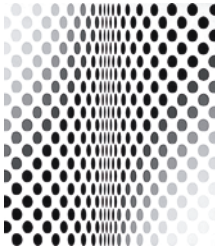
The emergence of computer graphics in the 1960's was much more of an art historical evolution than a technological revolution, particularly as almost all op artists, for example group *ZERO* with Heinz Mack, Otto Piene and Günther Uecker or artists such as Gerhard von Graevenitz, were already skilfully applying technology in their work. By the mid 1970's though, the constructivist-minimalist aesthetic of op art – also applied in early computer graphics – had been pushed aside by the shrill realism associated with pop art which made use of more sophisticated technologies of digital simulation.
Both op art and kinetic light-art movements were the result of a fundamental distinction that numerous artists in the 1960's made between light and colour.



Victor Vasarely, *Vega*, 1957



Georg Nees, *untitled (Schotter)*, 1965-68



Bridget Riley, *Metamorphosis*, 1964

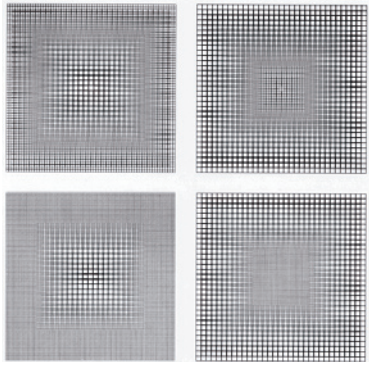
The attempt to make static images dynamic by using optical illusions, for example interference and moiré patterns, quickly expanded to include kinetic reliefs and site-specific light installations. The kinetic light sculptures and installations of Mack, Piene and Uecker followed in the tradition of the kinetic constructivist light experiments of Moholy-Nagy, Naum Gabo and Anton Pevsner. In their kinetic, mechanical light-art, artists like Nicolas Schoeffer were soon working with increasingly sophisticated electronic control mechanisms. Op art was not only the forerunner of early computer graphics; but it also paved the way for cybernetic art and robotics. And the moment that light-art was transposed to the television set, it became a precursor for video art – its most prominent exponent being Nam Jun Paik.

Open Art and Interactivity

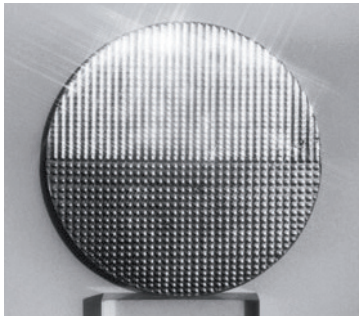
With its stark constructive quality, Op art was just one of several strategies implemented in the 1960's to counter both abstract expressionist painting and that of the informal art movement, which had come to a dead end. Further impetus came from the John Cage-inspired *Fluxus* movement, from which the work of Nam Jun Paik emerged.
In Paik's early video works from the 1960's, materials, media, and the conceptual diversity and indeterminacy that were characteristic of Happenings and the *Fluxus* movement, were united by a media-critical stance. This among other things, expounded the problems of the single-channelled mode of communication used by television, which was rapidly becoming a medium of the masses. In this context, theorists such as Fred K. Prieberg introduced the idea of the *gesamtkunstwerk* on the basis of technological art. Nam Jun Paik, who came to Germany in 1956 as a composer and who from 1958 onwards experienced the pioneering years of electronic music in the Studio for electronic Music in Cologne was, in addition to Cage, the perfect example of the *intermedia* artist.

At the beginning of the 1960's, he began to use techniques that were commonly used in the context of electronic music to transform electronic signals to manipulate television images; for example, with magnets, sine-wave generators and by linking television tubes with radios and magnetic tape recorders. In early works such as *Random Access* (1963), *Magnet TV* (1965) and *Participation TV* (1963) exhibition visitors could actively modify sounds and images. Thus the open and random nature of these artworks, accentuated by the choice of materials and *medial indecision*, could be enhanced by unforeseeable and indeterminable factors via playful viewer intervention. Paik's *irreverent* use of everyday technology (e.g. television sets) in his artworks resulted in their demystification and created a link between the viewer and their everyday life.

These early forms of spectator participation, typical of *Happenings* and *Fluxus*, underwent rapid technological advancement in the second half of the 1960's in the form of cybernetic art, which resulted in the first concepts of



Manfred Mohr, *p137*, 1972



Heinz Mack, *Light Relief*, 1959

Nam Jun Paik, *Magnet TV*, 1965

interactive art in the mid 1970's. As early as 1970, Myron Krueger's cybernetic environments, which now seem like primitive prototypes for historical video games, allowed for experimentation with visual structures that, within the bounds of certain rules, reacted to the movement of the spectator. We encounter early forms of interactive, real-time systems for *driving* moving images in the works of Krueger, but also in the interactive environments which were developed twenty-years later by Jeffrey Shaw or Bill Seaman. Like many of their colleagues, until the mid 1990's, they had to make do with computer-controlled videodiscs for their visual environments.

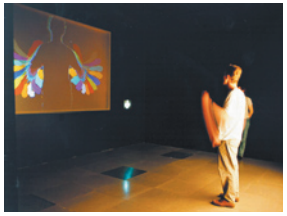
As opposed to computer graphics, which follow in the tradition of Op art and have maintained their appeal to this day, many of these early works of interactive computer art now seem antiquated. But putting their aesthetic half-life aside these works, inspired by utopias of virtual reality and immersive environments, provided the first models for a variable and partly intuitive control system for editing moving computer images.

Needless to say, a number of radical technical innovations lie between the so-called pioneers of interactive computer art mentioned above and the image experiments carried out in real-time at the *Frischzelle* festival. Media art today profits considerably from the rapid increase in memory, improved CPU performance, the miniaturisation of equipment and rapidly sinking prices; in other words, it profits from innovations in the area of consumer electronics. Many breakthroughs in the technology industry date back to the 1980's: The *MIDI Protocol*, originally developed to control electronic instruments, began to conquer the market in the mid 1980's. Due to its simplicity and sturdiness, it has become the basis for operating almost any kind of controller, and owing to sufficient CPU performance, today it can also be used to transform moving images in real-time. However, perhaps the largest technological advancement for editing moving images in real-time was developed just ten years ago.

It was not until the introduction of 3D graphic standards such as *OpenGL* and the integration of these into a number of programs, including *MAX/MSP* with the extension *Jitter*, or *Pure Data* – the open source alternative to *MAX/MSP* – that it became possible to edit moving images with the flexibility and spontaneity that has become apparent at *Frischzelle*.

As a relatively young discipline, multimedial computer-based improvisation of this kind has a lot of potential. Now that computer technology has reached the point where systems are both stable and flexible, experimental media art can broaden its horizons. In the future, media artists will continue to explore and play with the possibilities of new controller and interface technology in order to transform the computer into an intuitive instrument. But the sophisticated technology already available today requires fewer resources than ever before and results in greater freedom to develop a new aesthetic, which – as has been illustrated with several highlights – draws on the rich tradition of a technology-based art practice.

by Hubert Steins



Myron Krueger, *Videoplace*, circa 1974

all artists from Frischzelle / Early Winds

Paulo Alvares (piano), Niels Elburg (video), 8gg - Fu Yu (video, computer), Gogo (video), Sebastian Gramss (bass), Frank Gratkowski (sax), Maik Hester (Akkordeon), Hannes Hölzl (computer), Carl Ludwig Hübsch (tuba), 8gg - Jia Haiqing (video, computer), Zhang Jian (FM3) (computer), Yan Jun (Vocal, electronics), Niels Klein (sax), Chun Lee (computer), Li Tieqiao (sax), Wu Na (gu qin), Matthias Neuenhofer (video), Pei (video), Daniel Riegler (posaune), Vincent Royer (viola, electronics), Shenggy (electronics), Shou Wang (guitar, electronics), Joachim Striepens (Klarinette), Achim Tang (bass), Nils Tegen (piano, drums), Michael Thies (video), Clayton Thomas (bass), Christian Thomé (drums, electronics), Joëlle Tuerlinckx (video), Thorsten Wagner (Live-Electronics), Wu Wei (sheng), Yang Tao (electronics), Zafka (computer, guitar), Chan Yuan Zhao (gu qin), Philip Zoubek (piano)

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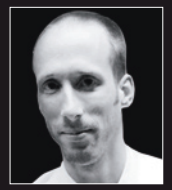
the artistic directors



Sven Hahne

born 1978 in Karlsruhe, germany, studied informatics at the technical university in Karlsruhe and media arts at the acedemy of media arts cologne. His works cover a broad range of diciplines, including, realtime/nonrealtime - videos, sound-installations, film-musics, as well as sensor-development, cybernetics and experimental brain research. Beside his work as musician and composer, he's a freelancing software-developer and artistic director at the Animax multimedia theater Bonn. His works were shown at numerous places including ZKM, Karlsruhe, Kunsthalle Budapest and Millenium Center Beijing.
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Echo Ho

cologne-based media artist. Shifting from poetic video installations in the 90's to distinctive social network performance concepts. In 2001, together with Hannes Hölzl, she founded the digital-fine art group *earweego*, venturing into computer based composition, live performance and mixed media installations. She took part in numerous international concerts and exhibitions, like ZKM - Museum of Contemporary Art, Millenium Museum Beijing, Palais de Tokyo, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Praetorium Kelon, Hong Kong Visual Arts Center. Now she is assistant professor at Academy of Media Arts Cologne.

http://www.earweego.net

Matthias Muche

lives in Cologne and works as a trombone player and media artist. He studied Music and Art at the *Hochschule der Künste Amsterdam*, at the acedemy of media arts cologne and at the *Hochschule für Musik Köln*. Muche works with many different Artists including Misha Mengelberg, Frank Gratkowski, Nils Klein, Larry Ochs, Robyn Schulkowsky and the Soundartist Andres Boßard. His cross-medial works, shown at places like North Sea Jazzfestival Den Haag, Moers Festival, Jazzdor Festival Strasbourg or the Cairo International Festival For Experimental Theatre are representative for the great variety and flexibility of his artistic work.

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