

# The Composer and the Composed

## Marina Rosenfeld in Conversation with Ines Goldbach

**Ines Goldbach:** As a composer and visual artist, you work with a range of sonic and material configurations. I would like to start our conversation by asking you about the start of an exhibition project like the one here at Kunsthaus Baselland. As the whole exhibition will be a site-specific installation, I'd like to know what your starting point for this project is, as well as for the other projects you get invited to do?

**Marina Rosenfeld:** In previous works I often started with a question: What does an amplified signal—such as a voice, or my voice—sound like in this space? This question has had a lot of valence for me—it's about more than the physical acoustics of a given architecture, although that is never uninteresting. But for me, the initial question is a way to begin to ask what is brought into being and what is destabilized by the transformation of a site from a neutral container into an amplifying volume. (As someone who has also been making improvised music for many years, there is some relation to another foundational question: How do I sound in this space?)

Sound people call the negative space of an architectural structure a soundfield, which is a beautiful term that always reminds me of the high-minded aspirations of a past moment like Land Art, calling to mind, for instance, Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field*, which was essentially a very composerly formalization of the state of anticipation. The event structure of sound is waiting—a soundfield is always only emergent. As my works have a certain modularity at this moment, I think I have been less interested in site-specificity or defining what I do as “sound art,” which again has certain aspirational connotations of poetic gestures realized by wrestling with sound's materiality or something like that, and more interested in what art can do with the rigid temporal mechanics of music. Or what music

becomes as it moves into the register of static and inert forms, or into the register of image production.

In the case of *We'll start a fire*, the postponement of the exhibition due to the pandemic has resulted in, among many other things, a certain amount of isolation and space in which to consider my own history of production and praxis. I found myself gazing at images of collectivity, especially the early all-female orchestras I used to mount. Some of the newer work in the show has something to do with confronting the traces—mostly pre-internet—of these quite monumental events, which brought incredible groups of artists together (Laurie Anderson, Jutta Koether, Josephine Meckseper, Kaffe Matthews, Okkyung Lee, Hrafnhildur Arnardóttir, the collective Threearfour . . .), and yet exist outside of what would be considered a minimum degree of documentation today. The work *Curtain* is both a view of this particular live action in New York in 2003—a 30-woman performance staged in a vacant car showroom near the Lincoln Tunnel—but also perhaps a kind of theatrical curtain, a scrim between then and now. It could be seen as either opening or closing, as a monument or a proposal. In that two-way sense, the scale and blur of the image to me also points toward the possibility that we might equally imagine ourselves there as audience or performer—as the composer and the composed, to put it another way.

**IG:** One of the elements of your layouts, perhaps the most important one, is that the visitor's passage through the space is somehow amplified by your works. How do you work with this (social) factor, when the actions and movements of each visitor cannot be anticipated?

**MR:** The first exhibition I did where an excessive amount of overhead amplification combined with a looping or recursive signal flow produced a sound-system permanently on the verge of feeding back was the exhibition *Deathstar* at Portikus in 2017. Visitors' high heels, passing geese, and cars were all picked up by the microphones as long as they were above a certain threshold in volume and fed back into the system. A network of digital delays kept things stable most of the time, though there were moments of explosive buildup—not feedback so much as radical accumulations of sound. This was kind of a revelation, because I realized that the transient noises of life in the gallery, which of course included any and all noise made by visitors, would be continuously

registered in the work, potentially destabilizing it. One became aware of oneself as a body, possibly a node, in a matrix. The implicit subject matter of all sound systems—the flow of power and relationality through an amplifying network—was made slightly more explicit. I continued to explore this operation in subsequent works, like *Music Stands*, which is a network of microphone-bearing sculptures that are closer to the ground and, in the sense of proximity and scale, more volatile and more vulnerable to touch, abrasion, exuberant vocality, and so on. The works do operate with a certain sociality, though I would say it is one largely oriented around the body and its absorptive or reflective capacities—the body as an aggregate of materials and automatic processes—more than a conversational or discursive space.

**IG:** There will also be works in the exhibition here in Basel that seem to be both notations and drawings at the same time. Do these notations document various sound performances that have already taken place, or do they perhaps call for future actions?

**MR:** The works on paper are called *Annotations*. They reproduce instances where I found marks in pencil, pen, or highlighter left by collaborators or participants in the scores to earlier pieces. A few also reproduce incomplete or partial photographs documenting the staging of performances. Quite a few reflect the creative intelligence and care the pianist Marino Formenti brought to performing transcriptions of the sound environment I generated as part of the *Deathstar* project. (Both the text scores and the “notes” belong, sometimes tangentially, to this body of work.) But they could also be the marks of any musician who decodes a score and arrives at a plan of action.

**IG:** Are they therefore also reflections on performances per se?

**MR:** Yes, in a way. I’ve been thinking a lot about what performance means right now, especially in this time of hyper-performative politics, where one might imagine performance as a modality of art to have to respond to the performative conditioning of all public discourse, or something like that. And performance in the context of visual art does seem eager to relinquish its status as performance, preferring a quick conversion to object or commodity form in some cases, or to discourse or a kind of nostalgic LARP in others. If I adopt the vantage point of the composer,

things look a little different: a very particular kind of functional relationship already exists between sound as an event, let’s say, and its object form—which, traditionally, has been the score. Of course, I’m not interested in notation that represents a kind of perfected abstraction in opposition to praxis. (Music history is already full of this stifling idea about genius and order and so on.) But I am interested in notation as a system—in the way notations and the events they call into being circle each other, call each other into and out of existence. To me, the annotations aim for the ambiguous status of both drawing and score: they reference the traces of events and are also speculative productions of new events. (I hope they will contribute something to the live performances we will realize within the exhibition in September.) I think you could say that, like all notation, they are a form of postponement, if you address them through the prism of the temporal. To notate is to postpone, to plan for, to open up a distance between the idea and its enactment. If a notation is also a drawing, it is a drawing that is not wholly mimetic, but instead gets in the way of description or reproduction, like an insertion in a line of code.

**IG:** Earlier we were discussing how complex it is to ascribe something like success or failure to a work, especially to the outcome of a performance that is called into being, so to speak, by a notation. Would you mind specifying in what sense a work can be a failure or a success?

**MR:** I have moments where I imagine lofty goals for these pieces—for instance, the reinvention of pleasure in aurality inside the abstract, hyper-relational networks we currently call home. I think we can say these efforts are not guaranteed to succeed . . . I see my work aiming for an intervention at a lower rung of the ladder: tinkering with the API instead of the (dreaded) user experience could be a fun way of putting it. Another metaphor could be an intervention along a sort of vector of sensual or sensorial events, especially at the moment of their decay, their aftersound. I assign shapes to these aftersounds: there is a flare-up of a “hot” signal in a mostly quiet sound system, and the structure of the work is that there will be another, and another. There’s an event to listening as there is to seeing, yet paradoxically, the introduction of time into the equation when you’re dealing with a temporal medium like sound can almost be counterproductive. I think the stillness and

atemporality of looking at painting, for instance, can be an easier ground for a viewer to interpolate temporal experience into—to experience a sustained or suspended kind of reception before a still object, if you will—whereas the dynamism and entertainment of a sound event can actually obscure the speculative and self-inventive nature of listening, the “composition” of the listener, if you like, which is a seductively beautiful possibility that is, once again, always emergent and unstable.

**IG:** The sculptures within the exhibition, *Music Stands*, were developed from 2019 onward and have the capacity to be objects within the space, bodies within an architectural structure, while simultaneously being able to react with sound—sending and directing it, reflecting and projecting it. Could you tell me more about these series of works that will be also an essential part of your layout for Kunsthhaus Baselland?

**MR:** I think these works imagine a different, more speculative relation to geometries of perception than that of my late colleague, the composer Maryanne Amacher, who devoted a significant portion of her research to analyzing and cataloguing the physical perception of sounds according to frequency and interval; she was an important inspiration and influence for me. I am still grappling with the specificity of Maryanne’s perceptions, which she catalogued in the name of a kind of science. In my own project, I make a more speculative claim about form: that we can intervene or tinker with the mechanics of reception, not just at the level of bodily processes but through suggestion, context, adjacency, image. The *Stands* and *Music Stands* borrow their forms from notations, they play with and pun on two- and three-dimensional forms, sound and aftersound, and enlist the body of the listener in a kind of machinic circulation.

**IG:** Thinking about the entire concept you developed for your exhibition project here in Basel gives me the impression of a kind of substrate or synthesis that brings together and extends your artistic approach of the last twenty-five years, if I am not mistaken. On that note, I would like to learn more about a project that you realized right after you graduated and that has now become a kind of key to your work—the *sheer frost orchestra* and your work with orchestras.

**MR:** Yes, an important part of my history, my first serious idea, was to create temporary

“orchestras.” They were quasi-performance art, quasi-musical gesture. The most well-known of them was, as you mentioned, the sheer frost orchestra, which I staged for the first time while I was still in art school in California in the 1990s. This was an all-female electric guitar orchestra of untrained musicians; I invented and taught everyone a music-making method of striking and rubbing electric guitar strings with nail polish bottles, which come in many shapes and textures of glass, to make a variety of sounds. The guitars were laid on the ground and were never touched except through the mediation of the glass: it was an explicit rejection of the “hot” masculine history of the instrument in favor of a “cold” anti-eroticism. It was also an entry in a history of feminist music-making whose main actors and events were almost completely unknown to me at that time, since they were not mentioned in any of the education I had received. I mean, in 1993 I knew about Marilyn Monroe’s all-girl band, Sweet Sue and Her Society Syncopators, from the movie *Some Like It Hot*, but it took me another decade to learn about the Feminist Improvising Group in 1970s Britain, for example. At the time, out of frustration and political animus, I wanted to make music with other women, and that was one of the reasons I organized the first sheer frost orchestra. In the intervening twenty-five years, I have not maintained this particular exclusion (female-only performances), but the work and its social orientation still resonates. I could have never predicted this, but I’m invited to remount this piece all the time; I usually decline, simply because the work was never meant to become a “work”—it was an action, an aggressive, ironic, comedic, sincere and unapologetic negotiation with ourselves and our ambivalence about the publicness of our female bodies, our desire for collectivity, and perhaps the possibility of some kind of glory.

Coincidentally, there will be a Swiss premiere of this piece in Geneva this spring, with members of Ensemble Vide and local musicians; due to the pandemic, it will be filmed instead of performed in front of a live audience. And so it continues. And I’m very happy if it takes its place in a history of feminist music-making that was hidden from artists of my generation.

**IG:** Do you feel that the perception of sound works has changed over time? Is making sound visible a concern for you?

**MR:** Not really. I do think that we associate visibility with knowledge, with legitimacy, with power and the law—like the police demanding, “Show me your hands” or “Show me your papers.” It’s a deep-level association, it’s epistemological, and, as a demand, it’s also an instrument of authority and control. All of our dominant metaphors are about lucidity, transparency, and so on.

I think it’s worth asking if there is not some way to subvert this operation with regard to sound, to look for modes of agency or knowing that do not put visibility above the many other forms of presence or sensuality. Not because there is something contaminating about the visual, but because this operation is maybe just too obvious and can have the overly literal character of something like social science. I prefer math, in the sense that I prefer a beat to a graph. I’m joking, slightly, but I’m also trying to signify a different, more ambivalent relation to the address of bodies moving through social space. Visibility as a concept, in other words, seems inadequate for the politics of the experiences that I’m interested in.

**IG:** Let me end with a final question, focusing again on your exhibition project here at the Kunsthaus in Switzerland. As you have referred to both your early orchestras and your more recent—and even very new—works, does the exhibition give the public a kind of overview of the last twenty-five years?

**MR:** I would say that the forms in the show point to different moments in my history, which has been organized around a series of negotiations with collectivity and listening, and divergent histories of modernism. But all the work belongs to the present and the way I am working now. I’ve tried to preserve the temporal character of the trace, as a register of uncertainty or non-certainty, through diverse activities and materials. I’m not trying to squeeze music into exhibition space. But maybe I am interested in how an idea of music, particularly the almost quaint notion of “computer music”—a sensual collaboration between bodies and machines—might still be a viable framework.