

Without possibility of correction.

Interview with Krzysztof Knittel

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Translation: Krzysztof Ćwikliński

Editors of Avant: Mr Krzysztof, when you initially agreed to this interview, you declared that your occupations include “being a practicing musician and composer, not a scientist”. We know that during your impressive education period you studied acoustics, computer music, and even programming at PAN’s Mathematical Institute. You also gave lectures about the new music; eventually: once you said (program of Warsaw Autumn ’77), that you would like to see in art not only the propaganda pamphlet, but rather some kind of litmus paper, to be able “to investigate the connections of inconsistencies, without fake adjustment”. If we also mention the permanent attitude of creative independence – paradoxically the revealed picture is... the picture of a scientist, but the scientist who we would like to expect. In your opinion are those associations random?

Krzysztof Knittel: As I remember, I was rather an average child, I preferred playing to learning etc., although I was also filled with contradictions, because – in spite of all this willingness to have fun – since childhood I had a great respect for the scientists, physicians and admiration for people persistent in achieving knowledge, for creative artistic and scientific

experiments, as well as for those who develop their own skills. In art I was looking for aesthetic values simultaneously with the truth about the world. Perhaps some of my views have something in common with the scientist's attitude, along with the efforts of getting knowledge and new skills or conducting scientific works. I also admire courageous people, who react to what is going around them. The KOR coworkers collecting data about the persecuted workers during the 1976 events in URSUS and Radom and about the militia's health-paths for strikers. I remember the activities of Mirek Chojecki who, going to Radom, was trying to bring help to the people tormented by the commies. How many of us, then young people, shared his courage?...

Recent research on human cognitive processes has gradually revalidated the first-person perspective in science and philosophy, and phenomenology has acquired a new, scientific dimension. Against this background the statements by philosopher-cognitivist Alva Noe sound interesting. He claims that art can improve research on perceptual consciousness, giving opportunities for a specific kind of experience. Normally the experience is too transparent for us; in art appreciation it is easier for us to stumble on it... Can you (and if so, to what extent) accept the usefulness of experiencing Krzysztof Knittel's creation for the needs of the perception researcher? Could modern music help us to understand not only the world, but also how it is understood?

It seems to me that through art and modern music in some ways we tame the world, discovering its wealth and not being frightened by complications. We notice the gravity of beauty, proportions and harmony between elements and even the meaning of exceptions to the rule. Anyway for me the most important life experience was, and perhaps still is, the adventure with impromptu music, that means all that is created without possibility of improvement, repeating, changing for a better version etc. During improvisation only NOW matters. At the same time all we play is the result of

many years filled with different preparations, practices and sound experiments. It is all to prevent NOW from paralyzing us because of the fear that I cannot fend for myself or I will lack the ideas, or what I play will be trivial and without any cognitive or aesthetic value. That is also a different method of cognizing the world, different from lone work in an electronic studio or equally lone work on a score. Improvised music is performed most frequently as team work, so a new need appears – the ability to mutually create along with other musicians, and sharing the responsibility.

Some researchers and theoreticians treat experience not as a passive, inner state but as a method of active engagement with the world, through this particular same body with all its potential (being developed). In consequence: contact with art also demands reaction, even including muscle reactions as well as changes in the brain's motor centre and balance sense etc. Even a conventional art appreciator engages himself entirely, he does not stop at cultural reflexion. Joel W. Kruger emphasizes the deeply embodied character of musical experience – this fact seem to be treated by creators and performers as crucial or one of the crucial elements (although the fact that music happens between bodies and in some environment with its physical conditions is not always consciously exploited). In this context performance art and form of installation etc. presents itself uniquely. We are going to ask carefully: could the creation of the tactile-acoustic installation To Touch The Snake From The Inside involve a similar belief or intuition? Or maybe it is for you already a trivial question, that seems interesting to us, the enthusiasts of reciprocal enlightenment between the sciences, philosophy and art? This question is in great measure addressed to the Practitioner.

In my music works or in cooperation with artists I frequently use my intuition. But in this case I must emphasize the role of memory, from childhood. As a youngster I went with my parents on the ghost train at the

Viennese Prater fun fair. I can still recall a thrill generated by different visual, auditory and tactile effects that accompanied the ride. I remembered that moment when I discovered that the curators of the Art For All The Children exhibition will be children at exactly same age as I was then.

Labyrinth, that means To Touch (The Snake From The Inside) was truly a kind of fairy-tale installation. The pair of curators from the Modern Art Centre, Marek Goździewski and Joanna Rentowska, dealing with the education and taking artistic care for the group of gifted older children, got the idea to organize the exhibition, whose curators would be... children. Children host the exhibition and choose the artists relying on attached projects. The idea was realized by the National Art Gallery Zachęta and from 17th May to 29th June 2003 the crowds of parents with their children of various ages were storming through the exhibition halls of the historic building near Malachowski square in Warsaw, viewing the Modern art for all the children exhibition. During the opening preview the young custodians introduced us to short poems describing each work, I remember to this day the beginning of the one about my maze: "To caress, to caress, it is Krzysztof Knittel's mess..." But how it looks like eventually? The concept of installation arose from childhood memories from visiting a famous Prater funfair in Vienna – there was a so-called scary train, which raised the strongest kind of emotion in me and my brother – the feeling of fear mixed with the emotion of fun (because the danger was not real, so this fear was a bit imagined), to speak briefly – adrenaline! I tried to provoke similar kinds of emotion while projecting the maze, in which the visitors move in the darkness, directing themselves via touch and hearing. As going further and further into the labyrinth, its walls were becoming a source of many unusual sensations: they were soft like a velvet, then suddenly as slippery as eel or unexpectedly shaggy. One could come across bulges, metal grating with strange rubber pipes sticking out of them, and all of this was constantly disappearing and reappearing while reaching the next angles of labyrinth. It was all built by Dariusz Kunowski, the director and set designer, later he became also the creator of a wonderful exhibition in The Warsaw Rising Museum and he

added several of his ideas to the maze concept, including the hole in the partition, where it was possible to put a hand inside and meet different surprises – the hair on a mannequin's head, ping-pong balls, which you cannot take out etc. These touch sensations were accompanied by sound effects – four stereophonic areas, through which the visitors passed...

Marc Leman focuses on researching the creation and appreciation of music on the embodied level, treating the body exactly as a medium between the subjective experience of the music and our environment (also in the physical aspect). Musical creation in this context is always strongly connected with its space-time localization. Usually this artistic here and now was diminished to strictly experiencing level, to some kind of personal mystery. In this context the saying that speaking about music is like dancing about architecture is not necessarily ironic. We have a feeling that the multimedia nature of many music activities as well as the use of electronic sources at some stage (not necessarily the initial one) engages some kind of knowledge, that is acquired all the time regarding the perceptual and cognitive possibilities of man (this is more a know-how type of knowledge than a descriptive one). We are going to risk the hypothesis that such knowledge being acquired by the musician/composer can have great meaning for cognitive studies researchers (we asked earlier about the cognitive usefulness of art appreciation).

I used to repeat (I don't remember after whom), that the best method of composition analysis is writing a variation of it. I recommend this initial exercise for the music critics – especially before writing a review of some composition's performance and even before the first review. It will be a good test for analytic skill – both composition and performance... Also I invite everyone to the computer studio in the music academy in Łódź or Cracow, where I teach. It is best to recognize what is most valuable in music (not only of the electronic variety) through our own attempts to compose and produce.

And speaking of the ability to apply knowledge from one art domain to another, without doubt such talent to associate research, facts and advances could be helpful in many fields of art and science.

Your work for years has been improvised and intuitive music. You are using electronically generated tones, and what's more, you write about shifting to sounds from margin: "I abandoned the 'centre' of the sound universe and I was looking at its borders, in the area of noises and cracks. I accepted this as my world of sounds, so I choose not to collide with regular musician's affairs, which use traditional instruments" (translation: Krzysztof Ćwikliński)¹. Here you use the superficial concepts: a strange kind of music and strange sounds. However, during the same lecture you are clearly against emphasizing this strangeness thing. The main topic is the so-called *Free Improvisation*. Quoting the speeches among others of Christian Menthe and Derek Bailey you show that free improvisation is not a kind of music, but rather the method of creating it. The intuitive character of this creative activity is then emphasized. Because advances in creating music and the consequences of taking on board all the factors of creativity are amongst our main interests – can we ask for at least a few words about how your personal, subjective alignment has changed on creating/performing music during the on-going waves of improvisation and during the development of your musical path? If we could excessively simplify this question: how were you feeling at that time and what was changing in these impressions for you as a Practitioner?

I have written and talked many times already on this subject and – to avoid repeating myself – I am attaching excerpts of my words from the interview by my son Tomek during his studies in the journalism faculty at UW in Warsaw ("Improvisation is everyday life", 2006):

¹ Knittel, K. 2007. Wokół Free Improvisation. Source: http://www.sme.amuz.krakow.pl/wyklady_2007_2009/FreeImprovisation.pdf, 08.06.2010.

When I am improvising, I do it often with others. I am communicating through the sounds, so improvisation is also joy of meeting. It is playing and listening at the same moment.

I do not think about beauty, I do think about truth. The need to play in order to create something beautiful is natural. There is no necessity to talk and think about it. It is the assumption. It is in the basics of each composition and performance. However, this is not essentially true, because you can do it too wonderfully, too soft and exaggerated with cuteness, you can create beautiful kitsch.

Tutti, team performance creates team energy, and music is energy exchange, as well as the exchange of energy with the audience. With a good audience also the performance is great, because in some sense the audience is cooperating with musicians, they need something beautiful and help to create it. We do not know how it happens, those are mysterious matters.

The discussion through the music sounds is important, there is no sending of information, any details, description, not even emotional expressions, as opposed to what people sometimes think. This is specific forms building, the pure form – as Witkiewicz would say – form without purpose, is alone the value in itself.

Improvisation is hard work. Nothing comes easily, without effort. The experience is gained over years, to achieve something during live performance you need to dig yourself through tons of sounds to create something of one's own, truly original. Of course what's original and what's not will be spotted, because only the original solution will be different. Often exactly this aspect of improvisation or composition provokes the listeners to negative reactions. They do not notice the great effort behind this, that everything else is simply pasted after this or that. This is a difficult and long process of learning. There is no good improvisation without preparation. Each phrase in music, which will later sound like the most freely improvised, originates from a catalog of a million possibilities, which are in your head and in your fingers, but those

millions have to exist already. The improvisation does not appear from nowhere, it appears from what you have seen and heard, what have you learned and what you have earned. The more times you play something, the better you are during improvisation. At the moment of the live concert you do not have to wonder what you should do during performance.

What does talking depend on? On this, that you have to have the set of words which you will be using to express your thought. The same is true with playing – you need to have the set of sounds, known by you, sometimes these sounds are taken from others, sometimes they are learned. You were also learning the language at school, from your mother and writing the first articles. Here it is the same. These are your words. You will understand more deeply the sense of a particular word. You can use the notion of beauty or truth. For someone these words may really engage their broad sense, while for somebody else they may relate to a rather narrow range of meanings.

What you call the heart is the binding together of all this.

I remember a scene, most likely the authentic one from the Ed Harris movie about Jackson Pollock. In this scene the reporter asked Pollock a question: “Are you using chance in your works?” Pollock, with all his wonderful scribble so beloved by me, answered: “ I don’t use chance, it is all conscious choice” (translation: Krzysztof Ćwikliński). That means, that for years he was learning and trying, he was practicing and painting sometimes worse pictures to achieve the particular nature of his hand gesture. The fact that he could smack the paint somewhere does not mean that another person could put the paint the same way. Perhaps it is possible for a child, but it is a crystal emanation of pure nature, so it is probably possible. Anyway Pollock was working hard to be able to paint it in a chaotic-like manner, as if the chaos of his canvases was accidental. He said yes to positive accidents, and no to negative ones. To allow improvisation to get positive features we must understand that this is really hard work.

Musicians asked their opinion on improvisation, frequently appeal to the secret, musical mystique – and then there is nothing left to ask. And in the opinion of Krzysztof Knittel: how does it happen that improvised music can be born at all, especially how can it be born collectively – and is there any problem at all, any kind of mystery?

This mystery is most of all a matter of talent, imagination and courage, but above all the skills (and preparations during rehearsal). Some need years to learn how to improvise properly, while the others just succeed in this from childhood. All of them need much work and hours spent on practicing, to achieve a satisfying level of improvisational skills.

Which music... do you not like?

I would rather not answer this question, because honesty could be misunderstood in this case. But speaking in general – I do not like music written without imagination and skills, performed without talent and preparation.

Thank you for your answers.