

## Split Friction

Birgit Ulher

Self-published Pbk 95 pp

*Split Friction*, the title, is appropriately punchy. Spoken aloud, the mouth stretches, then pouts and pushes. It's a concentrated nudge into the soundworld of exploratory trumpet player Birgit Ulher. *Split Friction*, the book, opens out to offer an enticing introduction to the expanded sphere of Ulher's work as an audiovisual artist. Its publication has coincided with a show dedicated to that work, hosted in November 2023 by Berlin's Errant Sound gallery.

Beyond its obvious relevance to that event, Ulher's intention is that *Split Friction* should complement her substantial discography, making available documentation that reflects her creative activity within a broader perspective. To that end she has commissioned texts from philosopher Johan Redin and academic Martin Kreybig, short descriptive commentaries that accompany a selection of striking visual images, and convey a strong sense of her videos, graphic scores and installations. The book also provides QR codes, linking to videos online.

On the cover, a bright yellow VW bus trundles around the grooves of a vinyl LP. This image is taken from *Public Transport*, an installation in which a number of those plastic record runners elicit sounds from LPs, recorded especially for this piece. Noises that emerge from the grooves were made by record-player mechanisms.

Such ironic humour is characteristic of the artworks represented here. Ulher's video *Wanderlust* traces the adventures of two inverted metal buckets, on their sightseeing tour of Hamburg and its environs. Located beside the harbour, in a subway or next to a railway bridge they shuffle and rattle in response to movements of programmed automata concealed within their expressionless exteriors. Activated from within, this pair of pails become, in Kreybig's words, "babbling observers of suburban scenes". Environmental sights and sounds blend or contrast with the presence of the chattering buckets.

Stills from the video *Bell Miner's Bridge* show Ulher standing beneath the reverberant arch of a bridge in Hamburg's Alsterpark. She wrings from her trumpet calls that evoke the sound of an Australian bellbird. Random sounds from a radio are channelled through a loudspeaker. Pedestrians, cyclists and a canoeist drift pass the musician, who is wearing a bright yellow dress and sandals. Colours take on a significant role in Ulher's audiovisual pieces, extending to codifications that feature in her graphic scores. In the video *Flotsam And Jetsam* lurid yellow, blue, red and green plastic bottles, suspended from nylon threads, serve as a focal point for a series of riverside vignettes. Agitated by a breeze or the flow of water, they collide and clatter.

Variations of texture play a key role, too. This will come as no surprise to readers familiar with Ulher's music. In a series of three pieces entitled *How To Get Away*, robotic Hexbug toys negotiate a surface of juxtaposed metal sheets, some dimpled, some furrowed,

others bumpy or smooth. A variegated sonic collage emerges from the slapstick action. On the final page of *Split Friction* a cartoon-like sketch depicts a radio transmitter projecting soundwaves towards distant celestial bodies.

The book, overall, illustrates and illuminates Ulher's engagement not only with textures and materials but, more profoundly, with a vibrational universe that underlies that everyday reality we encounter through our senses, those incessant, imperceptible waves that form what our bodies are able to see and hear as we experience a physical world.

Julian Cowley

