

Exhibition

Birgit Ulher: Split Friction

24. – 26. Nov. 2023, Errant Sound, Berlin

by Dagmara Genda

Though defining an art practice is a pedantic endeavour that rarely does justice to the work at hand, it does provide a series of path markers by which the viewer can navigate their meandering journey. This is how I access the work of Birgit Ulher, a “composer-performer” and “sound artist,” as stated on her website, who studied visual art—her first love was abstract painting—but was already playing free jazz as a student and to this day is primarily active in the improvised music scene where she performs as a self-taught professional. Ulher’s instrument is the trumpet, which she plays through self-developed extended techniques that she often describes through the vocabulary of art. She once praised British improvisors for their “pointillistic approach,” a term which stems from the visual arts, but with which she describes a scattered, staccato clacking. It’s a technique she often puts to good use, as she did in *Split Friction*, her recent 3-day concert series, exhibition and catalogue launch at Berlin’s Errant Sound. There, in a duo with either automated tin cans or circling toy cars, she performed her characteristic whistling, hissing and sputtering, as if in emulation of some sort of wheezing exotic bird or malfunctioning machine. The sound is more pragmatic than musical—it is first and foremost a matter of fact, that is, the result of breathing into twisted piece of brass.

Ulher’s performances at Errant Sound, first “Robo Tins I” (2021) and then “Public Transport” (2019) are called “sound and concert installations,” thus transforming “sound” and “concert” into adjectives. They are the mediums used to make a type of art object – the installation – in addition to the medley of materials she uses to fill a space, among which is the artist herself, seated on a wooden cube, almost motionless, using a trumpet to amplify her breath. Deadpan might be a good term to describe the show, but only inasmuch as minimalism in visual art can be described in a similar way. Expressive qualities are pushed to the background via industrially made objects—brightly coloured plastic containers as in “Flotsam and Jetsam” (2021), or automated toys called “hexbugs.” In “Robo Tins,” Ulher is seated in front of a grid of tiles reminiscent of Carl Andre, across which three metal cans noisily slide as if of their own volition. Andre’s influence also haunts the “How to Get Away” (2020) video series, which feature metal tiles of various textures over which automated objects, such as toy cars or geometric metal shapes, drive to create a series of repetitive but not necessarily rhythmic sounds. Though it is not uninteresting to close your eyes while watching the video or performance, the musical experience isn’t convincing without its material referent. The work is only complete in its moment as a performed improvisation, just as a Carl Andre work is completed by the viewer, who, like Ulher’s automated objects, is invited to move across the surface.

During her student days in 1980s Hamburg, notes Ulher, the visual arts offered more freedom than music. Today perhaps the opposite is true. When working with acoustics, whether it be improvised music or sound art, an ontological exploration of form seems to remain a respectable occupation. Not so in the visual arts where biennials, festivals or the now controversy-mired documenta are rooted in polemics because of a distrust of form. Everyone knows that yesterday’s transcendental forms are today’s corporate interests. Minimal scratching, white noise and breathy snapping, on the other hand, don’t quite have the same capacity for artwashing, nor do they reach the same price level, unless they function in a political, social or historical context. Sound, colour and form become

witnesses in the visual arts; they remain ontologically open questions in the fields of experimental music.

It is a shame that the catalogue, which was published on occasion of the Errant Sound exhibition, does not contain a longer essay examining the many productive intersections of sound, space and image in Ulher's practice as a whole. It is a missed opportunity to position the artist's work in a broader context, as would befit an over 40-year-long career. Instead, the book contains a fairly general one-page introduction and more or less poetic descriptions of recent works. The occasional brushes with theory are never really developed into a lens through which to experience or problematise the work, but left to dangle as associative citations.

In the end it is left to the viewer to consider the particular niche that Ulher occupies with her multidisciplinary sound-based practice. For me, it seems that robotically powered tins, prepared records, toy cars and everything else that the artist uses to bring a sonic object into existence are like the strokes, scrapers, gels and mediums that get pushed and pulled across a canvas. In Ulher's performances, sound becomes wet or dry, crackling or gauzy, scraping or sweeping, but never really narrative or dramatic. Ulher's sounds take material form. They come into existence as something that just is, a sort of productive uselessness that in simply being, declares itself to be enough.