

2001

BRING THE NOISE!

That Ronald Cornelissen and the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen have decided to include a pair of ear-plugs with each invitation to this 'Hieronymus Bosch Night' is more than just a sub-cultural jest. In 1979 I lost one third of the hearing in my right ear attending a noise performance by NON, alias Boyd Rice, in the Eindhoven Effenaar. While music hopes to please the ear, noise enters it violently in an attempt to invade and occupy the body. Although music is generally seen as a vital aspect of our civilization, noise is all too often associated with the uncivilized, the wild, the primitive, the physical, the hysterical and the feminine. I hope your senses are able to withstand the decibels that the 'Haunted Tube' and Princess Dragon Mom are about to bombard you with.

Moreover, there can be no more striking way of celebrating a homage to Hieronymus Bosch than by what happens here tonight. In many of Bosch's paintings and drawings we are confronted with incredible pandemonium. *The Garden Of Earthly Delights*, for example, presents us with a terrifying landscape ruled by chaos and tumult where tormented figures play on the weirdest instruments. If we look a little closer we see that in fact everything can be used to make noise. Kettles, pans, pots, pipes, whistles, badly tuned lutes....everything produces sound. Unlike the refined music of highly developed instruments like the violin or harpsichord, noise can, in principle, be made by everyone. Complex arrangements are not necessary, and noise-makers are not usually fettered by demands of an artistic, aesthetic or cultural nature.

As we begin the 21st. century we realize that art history and even the avant-garde have shown little interest in the specific aspirations and qualities of sound and noise. Andre Breton, the surrealist, maintained that aural representation must be reckoned inferior to visual representation. In his wake Dali banished music to the lower regions of the arts. Alright, artists like Kandinsky, Kupka and Delauney claimed to be able to hear colours, but for these artists, in the grip of theosophy and theories of melody and perfect harmony, unarticulated noise was of no significance. Music, divorced from the security of harmony and melody, conjures up a grisly audio-universe for the enlightened listener looking for spiritual stimulation, a world where Unidentified Sonic Objects obliterate any attempt at recognition or identification. In an era in which listening to Arabic music could lead to committal in a psychiatric clinic, Nietzsche dubbed the ear the sense organ of anxiety – could that explain why Bosch painted ears as humanoid beings? In *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1868), Lautreamont relates the tale of a deaf man who recovers his hearing after he is confronted with an apocalyptic event: he hears his own cry of anguish that invades all his senses. In Munch's iconic image *The Scream*, a tormented, despairing figure presses his hands to his ears in an attempt to escape some frightful vision.

Noise denies the alliance of harmony and melody. Music has become, since the 16th. and 17th. centuries, more and more synonymous with harmony and melody, with civilization and enlightenment. Seen from the perspective of John Cage ('Let the sounds be themselves'), music slips further and further into becoming a cultural practice that bans dissonance, intensity, volume, polyphony and tonal diversity to an increasing degree. Despite the fact that we are biologically capable of distinguishing more than thirteen

hundred tone colours, musical practice avails itself of a very limited range thereof. Optimum use is not even made of the 88 notes of the piano, restricted as they are by the dominant octave structure of contemporary music. Western music theorists often argue unjustly that tonality is determined by a physical hierarchy of sounds in our surroundings. My ears tell me something different: tonality and the predominant use of chords appear by their nature to overrule and discipline 'autonomous' tones.

Some theorists, then, assert that tonal music, often composed on paper, functions primarily as ideological packing material – dissonance is bad; harmony is civilization – dissonance is barbarism. In many classical compositions, for instance, listeners experience sounds that stray away from harmony as tension, or as being problematic, while movement towards the harmonic is celebrated as home-coming and reassurance. Within a few centuries harmony succeeded in suppressing earlier musical possibilities and in forcing the broad range of rhythm and noise into such systematic non-categories as 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' music. The success of this coup went hand-in-hand with the coming to power of symmetrical, linear, mathematical, but also xenophobic thinking: the 'Enlightenment Project'. The emphasis on harmony and intellectualised systems of notation resulted not only in the disappearance of a great number of Western musical influences, but also led to the banishment of irregular and Eastern melodies from popular folk-music. (Leaving aside exceptions such as William Blake and Bela Bartok, who took the opposite stance and worked heterodox folk tunes into their compositions.) Within a few centuries, our ears could no longer tolerate any music not harmonically based. When an 18th. century Dutch traveller visited a pirate republic in the north of Morocco, he was entertained by a fiery, multicultural dance orchestra that served up stirring music betraying many disparate musical influences. The Dutchman fell into a panic, describing the orchestra, not as a sampling of autonomous culture, but as a new technology of psychological intimidation against outsiders – many times more efficient than weapons.

Medieval attitudes towards music, on the contrary, appear remarkably tolerant of a diversity of musical opinions and influences. The increasing interest in a central, universal tonality came surely in the wake of the famous studies by Rene Descartes and Thomas Hobbes. In his argument for a mathematical rationality, Descartes approached harmonic tonality with the same enthusiasm as he displayed in putting his scientific philosophy in the service of civilization, progress and the modern state. In 1651, Thomas Hobbes published his famous book *Leviathan*, in which he formulates the ideal of ordered reason and scientific thinking within the framework of a centralized, controllable and rational state. On the whole, *Leviathan* exudes fear of noise and dissonance in the broadest sense of the word: fear of collectivism and tribes, fear of nature and primitivism, fear of the body, woman and the non-westerner, fear of passions and cravings. According to Hobbes, people should sacrifice their desires and peculiarities to the general, reasonable interests and the central authority of the national state. In other words, in the ideal that Hobbes fosters, harmony and culture are hailed as an enormous forward leap in human evolution. The non-civilized and dissonant life, on the other hand, is rough, brutal and short, and therefore to be rejected absolutely.

The ideal of the enlightened and harmonious state found its musical counterpart in the ideal of the concert. The concert - derived from 'concertare', meaning the synthesis or neutralization of dissonant elements – is the spectacle of civilization *par excellence*: a harmonized and specialized ensemble erects and impassable barrier between performer

and audience; is situated in an authoritative and hierarchical context; is directed by one conductor; and offers the composer the same status as the philosopher or statesman. Is it to be wondered at that Jean Jacques Rousseau described the longing for harmony and the rise of the concert as the demise of cultural diversity in Europe?

However, this striving for static societal, cultural, intellectual and musical harmony – as also voiced in *Leviathan* – came up against social and cultural resistance. The myth of harmony was accompanied by enormous explosions of social unrest, insurrection and plundering. In pre-industrial revolts, rioters made use of a great variety of unorthodox musical instruments to produce noise and rhythm. Till deep into the 20th. century such noise performances or ‘street raves’ appear to have been the order of the day. In the Netherlands one spoke of ‘ketelmuziek’, Germany preferred ‘Katzenmuzik’, while in England the phenomenon rejoiced in the name ‘rough music’. Rough music comprised a symbolic vocabulary, in which noise played a leading role. Noise, dissonance and unstructured drumming not only challenge the ideology of harmony and refinement, but likewise celebrate the cultural polyphony of every-day life – to paraphrase Cage: ‘Let the sounds and the peoples be themselves’, or as Chuck D would put it half a century later: ‘Power to the people and the beats’. Noise, rough music, ketelmuziek is at once communication and communion. Moreover, the use of prefixes like rough, kettle or cats implies a social practice in which the established culture is decoded, and a popular culture re-encoded. As social practice, noise music can be employed to reconstruct the community and, at the same time, to badger the illusions and tensions of the harmonic society.

A good ten years ago I was involved in researching a specific instance of ‘rough music’ in a village in Brabant. In the hot summer of 1930, a score or so farmers formed a sound system by arming themselves with instruments like wine vats, gherkin barrels, metal pipes, lamp glasses, glass splinters and cowbells. By making noise – the privilege of the poor – they warned the local community and spread the news that an important event was imminent. The gang had organized a march on the private residence of a wealthy factory owner in an attempt to force him to leave the village. What was it about? The shoe-manufacturer regularly terrorized and humiliated his wife, a farmer’s daughter, and was said to be exploiting poor factory workers, many of whom were former farm labourers. Moreover, he could not keep his hands to himself, intimidating the female workers of the stitching department. When the noise band approached the house in the middle of the village, they were greeted by a jubilant crowd of around 1500 mainly young people – a quarter of the local population. It was a Monday evening, to wit ‘Blue Monday’, traditionally the day when alcohol flows freely and sympathy for noise is at its height. On that deliberately chosen evening, a small noise protest was transformed into a festive, but also violent ‘street rave’, that held sway in the village for four days and nights. The crowd sang songs, made a racket, destroyed public property, fought with the local constabulary and military police, smashed the windows of the shoe factory and forced the owner to leave the village. Noise, or rough music, proved to be an outstanding means of deconstructing prevalent social and cultural attitudes, and was immediately recognized by a large section of the public. Even the regional press supported the noise protest and proclaimed the factory owner’s departure a blessing for the community.

If rough music still showed a few signs of life here and there in the countryside during the 20th. century, our great cities celebrated the departure of noise and dissonance with much

display and fanfare. When Amsterdam organized the 1928 Olympic Games, Rotterdam was unwilling to be outdone. The city of the Maas organized the Neniĳto (Netherlands Industrial Exhibition), in which Rotterdam's enterprises could present to the world their latest, often maritime gadgets and technologies. To underline the enormous forward step cultured Rotterdam had made in an even more strikingly visual way, fifty Africans were brought over to set up a 'Negro village' next to the Neniĳto, where they would attract the tourists' attention with their 'primitive' drumming. Next to this, the organization installed a big symphony orchestra to let the same tourists hear how civilization's soundtrack should really sound. With this, the Neniĳto became Rotterdam's first mass entertainment 'event' to demonstrate the alliance between white supremacy and harmonic music. It was the period when the idea behind *Music While You Work* was born: music must be harmonious so it can nestle like a drug in our domesticated brains, while we submissively fulfil our civic duties.

Just as the plantation owners and slave drivers of Mid-, North and South America did not succeed in suppressing the drum, and the police kept up a grim-faced hunt for clandestine drummers, so it was not possible to ban noise and rhythm from European and American society. Especially in Rotterdam, the cultural offensive of the Neniĳto proved fruitless. Between the wars there erupted here a lively dance-culture, fed mostly by a wide array of Jewish and Gypsy orchestras. Black musicians after the second World War injected a jazz-culture into Rotterdam, that can still be seen and felt today. Noisy punks later made Rotterdam a veritable 'terror dome', where the merits of harmony, enlightenment, civilization and progress were subjected to cross-examination.

Since the Neniĳto, noise has become more than ever the domain of an anti-xenophobic underground culture. A few years ago, Ronald Cornelissen and Ben Schot organized an international noise workshop in Rotterdam, in which artists, musicians, film-makers and writers took part. The splendid title read: *I Rip You, You Rip Me. Honey We're Going Down In History*. During a forum in De Vlerk, writer and ex-beatnik John Sinclair and visual artist Mike Kelley spoke of their fascination with noise. In 1967 Sinclair became manager of the legendary punk noise band The MC5 – the first band to bring the sound of street violence and revolution to the stage, work without a producer and set all volume controls at 11. In 1967 the biggest city riot in the history of the USA broke out in Detroit. The whole of the inner city turned into a battlefield, houses and offices went up in flames, and the chiefly black population fought desperately with the police, the army, the landlords and their gangs of toughs. Tens of thousands of people ended up behind bars, many found death or were hospitalised – even today Detroit looks like a recent war-zone.

Sinclair and the MC5 used a noise band as a medium for resistance and solidarity. *Kick Out The Jams, Motherfuckers!*, their first single, immediately set the tone. The band became the megaphone of the White Panther Party, whose purpose was to give support to the Black Panthers and black protest while also spreading anti-Americanism among white youth. Mike Kelley, also of Detroit origin, made it clear how noise has influenced a whole generation of critical artists, writers and musicians. Since the riots of 1967 Detroit has remained a centre for noise and dissonance. Iggy Pop and The Stooges made the streets there unsafe; Mike Kelley formed there his Destroy All Monsters; and there is where Ronald Cornelissen met Princess Dragon Mom, whom you will shortly experience live. The first and probably most important techno-noise-posse Underground Resistance was also born in Detroit. Moreover, Underground Resistance was the collective that most

significantly made an issue of 'black' and 'white' music. The first fans could not figure out if Underground Resistance consisted of black or white musicians – a discussion fortunately not deemed necessary in jungle, dub, and also in noise (the so-called 'Stop Racial Pride genres').

Today noise is made in Japan, in Kenya, in Brazil, in Holland. Rotterdam too is still a notable noise-town, as the obscure festivals in the Poortgebouw, among others, point out. Noise offers the shortest route to the underground and subculture, because noise can never become 'music while you work' and, by its nature, will always stand in opposition to the myth of harmony. To the sound of noise you will not work harder, win wars or football matches, seduce boy- or girlfriends, but rather be confronted by yourself in exile in your own domesticated body, to use Kodwo Eshun's striking image. Noise makes you aware of how programmed and colonized your senses are, and how you were domesticated by the established harmonic order before you ever had a chance to resist. And say honestly: are the noise-fundamentalists Hieronymus Bosch and Ronald Cornelissen try to tell us anything else?

(translated by Chris Kennedy)