

INTERVIEW: Bob Ostertag by Mauricio Martinez

Transcribed by Tiffany McCormick

In the 1970's, late '70's, in New York, part of the downtown improvisers scene using an analog synthesiser, back when that was pretty rare, I was the only one doing that. Then I took ten years off from music and was very involved with the political struggle in South America, in particular, El Salvador, and became a journalist and was working with media, and then since I've had one foot in journalism and one foot in scholarship and one foot in musical practice, all of which were highly involved with questions of technology, the body, society, so really, there's almost nothing I've done that we couldn't talk about in that regard.

Machines can rarely do what we want them to and more often what we do is tailor our wants to what machines can actually do. I'd say that's one of the hallmarks of contemporary culture is that the things we desire, the reason we desire them, is because that's what technology can offer us and our desires turn out to be much more elastic and malleable than technology is. So back in the late '70's electronic music technology was pretty much a studio thing, it wasn't really brought out of the studio much. It began to be put on stage by rock bands more than anybody else, groups like Emerson Lake and Palmer and Yes and groups like The Beatles got way into it, but they didn't perform. And the other place where you would find electronic music back then was in national radio studios in Europe or academic institutions, ones in Canada and the United States, but that was all pretty much laboratory-based, it wasn't performance space and I wanted to use that stuff in performance, so I would drag that stuff on stage, and you would literally have to drag that stuff on stage because it was not the small and portable laptops that we have now, and I didn't want to use the sort of keyboards and synthesisers that rock bands used back then. Those of us who were working with the synthesisers of the time really objected to putting keyboards on synthesisers, we thought pianos did the job just fine what pianos were designed to do, and we thought synthesisers could maybe do something very different so we tried to not box ourselves in by attaching a keyboard to the synthesiser and when Anthony hired me into his big band he didn't realize that I didn't have a keyboard. So three days before getting on the plane to Europe at the rehearsal he handed me a pile of keyboard charts to learn, and I couldn't do that so there was a moment of truth between Anthony and I, but you know it's making room for the unexpected and the mistake is a crucial part of Anthony's aesthetic. In fact you could say that a lot of his music practice is to set up situations in which mistakes and kluges in improvisation are inevitable, so I don't think he was too bothered by it, he had a moment where he was startled and we ran with that. So that was my first gig and I was terrified, what was I going to do because the group was playing big band and marches and things like that which is about as unidiomatic to a non-keyboard noise box like those old modular analog synthesisers were. As you can imagine it would have been more appropriate to put something like that in a moller symphony than it would be to put it in a big band march.

When I started improvising in the '70's with analog synthesisers, if you were going to take and analog synthesiser on stage you had no choice but to improvise because you could never make those things on stage twice, it was actually impossible those things were, you had all these patch cords and you make these very complex patterns and then the knobs would be tweaked and you could never repeat something, so when you worked in the studio the rule of thumb was always

have the tape recorder ready at hand because if you got something you liked you better tape it right then cause you'd never ever get it back. So when you took that on stage you had no choice, improvising was the only way to go, but the improvising was a very different thing than improvising with an acoustic instrument cause you were playing with all these automated processes and you would never be able to accurately predict what the decisions you would make, you'd never be able to predict with one-hundred percent accuracy how they were going to alter these automated processes that were underway and then you would intervene with that process and then you'd hear that result of your intervention and then you'd make another intervention in response to hearing that result, but the results were always a little bit unknown and so you can find analogous situations in any sort of industry where the operators of machinery have to monitor extremely complex processes in a way using a jet airplane or running a nuclear power plant would be fairly similar activities with the exception that if you screw up when you're playing a synthesiser there's no consequence which, in my view, is what makes it art. Art is where we get to experiment without consequence. Now, with digital technology that situation is actually precisely turned upside down, so it's very difficult to create a situation with a computer in which you can intervene in an automated process and not know very exactly what the result is going to be. Furthermore, since fundamentally what computers do is place specified procedures and operations in precise sequences, the notion of recording or playing back a recording has been exploded into something far more comprehensive and complex. So whereas in the '70's there was no way I could repeat a performance I had done on a synthesiser, today with a computer there is no performance I could possibly do that could not be recorded and repeated and at many different levels of abstraction I could record the final sound output, or I could record the data processes, or I could record the gestures of whatever input device I'm using so that raises the question of what really constitutes a performance and why do it? Why do you not just press go? Whether that's at the level of just playing back an audio recording or pressing go to begin a series of algorithmic procedures in the computer or press go to trigger a series of playbacks of recorded gestural data. So one of the things that improvisation has come to mean in the context of highly technological performance is that improvisation is the last claim to the legitimate presence of a human in the performance of music. This is what I think: DJs are actually, the reason we have a DJ, why don't we just have Ipod mixes at all these places where fundamentally what they're doing is playing back previously recorded music? The DJ's claim to a legitimate role in the whole ordeal is that he or she is improvising, so without the claim of improvising there'd be no reason to have a human involved in the process at all.

Well, technology is never perfect at anything, if it was the world would be a very different place. We struggle to make technology do what we want it to do and as I was saying before, our desires are actually far more malleable than our technology. We convince ourselves that our technology is quite malleable but actually our desires are more malleable and I think if you look around the world today, what our actual lives are like, what jumps out at me is that what's fundamentally happening is not that our technology is becoming more and more capable of realizing some sort of timeless set of human ambition and desire, and rather what's happening is that human ambition and desire, which has always been extremely historically contingent, is more and more shaped by what our technology can do.

It's not surprising to me that as electronic music has become dance music, which it really has become, it's always important to be clear that for most people now when you say electronic

music what they mean is what happens at the club and most people have no idea that there even is this tiny little niche of people who do something else with machines other than make beats to dance with, and I remember very clearly when that transition happened. When I first got into “electronic music,” electronic music meant this very sort of esoteric experimental genre of musical endeavour which, outside of a few courses at a few institutions of higher learning, that’s basically forgotten, but it’s not surprising to me what electronic music has become cause I don’t think you can sustain a musical practice that doesn’t have the presence of the human body, so in a lot of ways the world of music made by machines has witnessed a cross, two counter developments. One is the disappearance of the body of the musician and the reappearance of the human body in the form of the dancer, so when you go to hear electronic music now, rather than seeing a virtuoso musician in terms of the performance what you see is a lot of virtuoso dancers and dancing has become this thing that you know it certainly wasn’t in the 1970’s, when hippies would go dance they’d just kinda slouch around, what kids do when they dance now to electronic beats is a whole other thing which is actually quite incredible, so the human body refuses to go away, it might sneak in the back door or the side door, or drop in by a parachute, but it won’t go away. And in terms of your question of machines as these perfect devices that make perfect realizations of our ideas I can tell you two anecdotes about that; one is for years my music wasn’t taken very seriously in academia because I didn’t write my own computer codes and the idea in academia was if you didn’t write your own code you weren’t serious about “computer music”. I would show up with some sampling keyboard that I’d bought at the store and people would ‘what’s that?’ and I would always say show me the incredible music that’s been made by somebody who’s writing their own code that couldn’t be made otherwise and I’ll be convinced, but most of that music I think is crap and people get confused about what’s good music and what’s good code and engineering and making music are not the same thing, they’re actually very different things and I remember being in a sort of debate once at university where the professor, a computer music professor, said if you don’t write your own code you’ll never have a computer that does exactly what you want it to do, and I responded by saying there will never be a computer that does exactly what I want it to do, there will never be any sort of machine that does exactly what I want it to do.

The signature thing about mechanical reproduction or chemical reproduction in the case of film is that while the way in which art was made changed, the way in which it was distributed did not change and Benjamin, I think, was not only right but was unbelievably prescient in his intuition that the advent of copies in which every copy was equal and there was no original that was gonna change the way we perceive art, that’s why that essay is so seminal because he was the first person to call attention to that, but it’s important to note that as much as we talk about that essay today we don’t mechanically reproduce art anymore we electronically reproduce art which is a very different thing. ‘Copies’, for example, I don’t think is a relevant term anymore. This is why this whole area of copyright law is so Archaic and nonsensical now because when I put my music online, which I did, I put all my music online, anybody can listen to it. They’re actually not making a copy every time they hear it and it would be absurd to say that they did, you’d have to believe that every time somebody accesses a website they make a new copy which is irrelevant, it’s not a relevant concept yet we’re still trying to regulate all this as if copies was still the relevant idea. So we reproduce our art electronically now and the fact of reproducing art and the fact of distributing the art have become the same process and so this is a new paradigm entirely and to me the most interesting thing about Benjamin’s essay is he explicitly says up until

that point the question that everybody had been asking was whether or not could photography be viewed as art? And he says the real question to be asked is how photography is going to change what we think art is, change the very nature of art and I think that way of thinking is very provocative and that's the question we need to ask now: is the way the art is distributed now gonna change the very meaning of what we think of as art? And I think the answer is obviously yes, for example, I don't think the category of video art is gonna survive YouTube, how could it? What precisely is different? How precisely is video art different from those millions and millions of videos up on YouTube? If video art becomes something that's engaged in by most of the people in the world then we don't need the word 'video art', we can just call it life, you know, so yeah we need to re-examine our understanding of art in light of the feast of instant world-wide, limitless, electronic distribution. Now one of the ways that this has challenged our understanding of art, if you want to look at the way art is taught in institutions of higher learning, there's sort of a crisis now, I would say, whether you think of art or music or anything else and now that art is not a scare thing anymore, the notion of art was always that art was sort of this rare thing, art, my goodness, you can't get away from it. I'm going wilderness camping for two weeks next week and you really have to like get in a kayak and paddle off to the BC coast to not be bombarded by it all the time. Recorded music now is so, people can't make documentary films now because, or when they make documentary films they often strip in fake, they redo the audio later to get recorded sound out because they'd have to pay royalties on all that recorded sound and if you turn on a microphone anywhere in our world you're going to get recorded sound that's how ubiquitous it is. So in institutions of higher learning, the question is inevitably being asked of all this "artistic activity", what do we privilege as worthy of being taught in an academic setting? For example, I'm supposed to teach classes in music at the university I teach at, and how do I decide what's worthy of privileging in a classroom context? Should I be teaching them to make electronic dance beats? And the answer that so far has come is that the "art" that's privileged as worthy of resources, worthy of the resources of the institutions of higher learning is art that can somehow be cast as research and this is because the sciences have remade the university in their own image and research is a scientific concept it's not an artistic concept. If you were to ask Mozart the research he did before he wrote his music he would have no idea what you were talking about, but now I'm supposed to teach art and music, but when I go up for a merit review at my university, they want to see my research and now we have this idea of sound art and I think in a very real sense that definition of sound art is music that can easily present itself as research.

The question of the political role of our, wow, I've been in so many of those discussions and they're always the same, nothing ever resolved, the two things I have to say about that is, first of all, that I know that my art is often referred to as being political art, but I don't think of it in that way, in the sense that when I think of politics what I think of is social struggle toward a particular goal, trying to make it so that poor people are not so poor, or that oppression is not so acute, or that environmental catastrophes are mitigated. I don't think art really contributes to any of those things, I don't think art is goal-oriented in that respect and certainly my work, even the part of my work that's most commonly referred to as political art, I don't imagine is going to change anybody's mind about anything, that listening to it is going to result in the fact that the listener is going to agree with me in my political views. I just, I don't think that's how peoples' ideology is formulated and changed. I think political ideology is far deeper than that. I make that music cause it's the music I want to make, it's the music, every artist, when they sit down to

work, whether they're a sculptor or a dancer or a novelist or composer, when they sit down to work, everybody has a certain affinity with a kind of material. Some sculptors like to work with granite or some like to work with marble, some painters prefer water colours and some prefer pen and ink drawings. Some composers have a natural gift for harmony and the material that I'm drawn to when I sit down to work over and over again is the social and political reality of my time and so I work with that material cause I don't think I have any choice, it's where my attention is drawn.