

Subject: Re: **Interview**

From: **Kim Cascone**
To: **Daniel Neumann**

Between: Tuesday, September 08, 2009 2:35 PM
And: Monday, September 28, 2009 1:23 PM

----- Original Message -----

Daniel Neumann wrote:

First of all, congratulations on the 10th anniversary of the .microsound mailing list!
And that leads to my first question: What was your motivation to launch this list, back in 1999?

Kim Cascone: Thanks for the congrats and yes it has been a *very* interesting journey since 1999.

KC: The microsound list was started in the late 90's because the laptop was just becoming fast enough to run audio in real-time and also affordable enough for musicians to buy all of which was having a distinct effect on music at that time.

We accept musicians with laptops on stage now much more easily than back then but there was a definite suspicion of the role of the laptop in live performance. Not only was music production becoming more decentralized due to the Internet but the music studio and the live instrument were conflating into one physical device allowing it to shape shift according to the function the laptop needed to serve. And software was taking advantage of this new market fueled by the steady increase of CPU speeds so there was an explosion of music software being developed.

As a result there was an flood of musicians moving from expensive dedicated music hardware to cheaper music software running on laptops. Case in point would be the cost difference between a hardware TB-303 versus a software version of the same. But since CPU's were just barely able to keep up with the needed processing power there were many problems with buffer under runs and software not being ready to handle what was being thrown at it in terms of work. Some of these problems helped to craft a stylistic device known as 'glitch' but microsound came about on various levels, not just the 'accident' -- which many people mistakenly think is synonymous with microsound.

Having sold my record label three years earlier, in 1996, I felt that there was was a definite need for an outlet where people could discuss and share what was taking place in digital music at that time and hence the list.

The name came from a lecture given by Curtis Roads I attended at CNMAT @ U.C Berkeley in which he talked about the various types of granular synthesis he termed Microsound. He was just about to publish his book of the same name and then played us some of the music he had worked on using these granular techniques and this impressed me quite a bit.

The lecture served as a navigational star - reflecting what was happening in digital music so I borrowed the term 'microsound' for the list and the aesthetic that was developing.

It represented an atomic approach to constructing digital music, manipulations on a bit level while exploring the techniques of working with digital information.

DN: That's really interesting, that the naming of the list is so closely related to the Curtis Roads book (published by MIT 2001), because the book is so (exclusively) connected to the academic approaches and the list seems to rather assemble people working outside of academia. Not that this difference is of great importance to me, but I didn't know this close intersection at the beginning. The 'glitch', that you described as an insufficient synonym to microsound for many people, seems to be a division though, because the aesthetic of glitches and errors is not at all mentioned by Roads. But to go back to your perspective, did your understanding or your definition of the term and the practice of microsound change in these last 10 years?

KC: Yes, Road's manipulation of digital audio is entirely deterministic whereas the use of digital detritus is not but 'glitch' was something that unfortunately got bolted firmly onto the front of .microsound due to the popularity of the paper I had written ('The Aesthetics of Failure') for the Computer Music Journal back in 2000. It's funny how people connect the dots sometimes.

Be that as it may, there is a definite correlation between .microsound and failure or glitch. But while .microsound encompasses these techniques it is not based solely on them. And this confuses many people and obviously begs for a clearer definition of the term.

The idea of .microsound as a genre is rooted in digital audio techniques but is not defined by them. What I mean to say is that I see .microsound more as a fluid that gets poured into new containers by the artists working in exploring new ideas. I've always felt .microsound was more of a *smooth* Deleuzian space rather than a *striated* one.

.microsound deals with sound on both the structural and granular levels but it also uses subversion and detritus as a part of its aesthetic. In other words, .microsound artists use the technical aspects of digital audio as their primary sound palette that sound engineers spent large amounts of money to either get rid of or fix. For example, I'm working on a piece that makes use of that wind-on-microphone distortion that people take great pains to avoid while recording outdoors which is based on some ideas I have about 'sonic gauzes.'

But going back through all the projects I've produced for the .microsound community over the past 10 years I'd have to say that detritus and glitch are the two most prevalent characteristics in most of the work.

DN: The celebration of this anniversary was also initiated in this very *smooth* way, even more than other .microsound projects, that usually have a unifying format (like only mp3s e.g.). For the anniversary you put out the idea and people could pick it up to further develop different projects without you controlling or curating them at all. Is that your idea behind the projects to create these kind of rhizome structures, that develop in a de-centralized, non-hierarchical way? Why do you think this is important?

KC: Yes, I wanted the 10 year .microsound celebration to be rhizomatic. I've often tried to initiate community projects in this manner but it never seems to work. People seem to need direction, instructions and deadlines - none of which seem to get used in the long run but it serves as a framework which I suppose is necessary.

But with the 10 year celebration I think the framework might be more self evident, i.e. it assumes the shape of a 'party,' a 'concert,' an 'event' so people have a prefabricated container to work with and need only pour in whatever they feel is .microsound content.

This form of emergent organization is very important to me and I have used it for a workshop I give using genetic algorithms as a framework for creating sound art. Some of this sort of organization takes place naturally in online communities but when something project-oriented with a specific goal in mind and a deadline appears then it needs to be colored in a bit more for people.

But I enjoy the process of watching things take shape, evolve and grow from an idea to an actual object and 'planting seeds' is one way to do this.

DN: And maybe with those projects, it is more like gardening than we usually think, that growing depends on so many factors - the seed itself, being only one of them. But from a more general perspective, do you think the rhizomatic and open ways of social interaction are to be preferred?

KC: I'm not going to say that the rhizomatic formation of networks should be preferred by people but so much of our social networking and even the Internet itself is forming in this way. So it is no accident that we have adopted this organizational structure in other parts of our lives. I also think Deleuze and Guattari were years ahead of their time in seeing this type of organization coming ('body without organs' as well) and theorizing around it. We have to adopt more organic structures in order to eventually dismantle the hierarchical structures that have only benefited privileged segments of society. A rhizomatic growth/structure is open and hence an evolutionary one that can benefit everyone who becomes a part of it. Planting seeds in different 'soils' can yield very interesting results at times.

DN: Yeah, that makes sense. With this last question I just wanted to grasp how far you'd draw the consequences of those theories. Because in my experience in collaborations e.g. or in organizing events non-hierarchical structures usually produce more interesting results. But, let's get back to .microsound: At Diapason you are presenting your installation "The Language of Ghosts". What were your reasons for selecting this piece for '10ms'?

KC: I chose the piece 'Language of Ghosts' because I feel it's one of the better installation pieces I've done. If the levels are set correctly and the environment is right the piece has a gossamer-like quality, almost invisible, so I'd consider it .microsound in a different sense. The piece is not based on technical failure but rather on the ability of ones auditory apparatus to hear it - the piece is supposed to be mixed very low in a space, at the same level as ambient noises in the background.

DN: So with the piece you are shifting the listeners attention to sounds, that can barely be distinguished from the ambient noise. And inversely this shifts the ambient noises forward to mix with the piece, which I assume is why the sounds feel like 'Ghosts', right?

KC: Yes, often times we maintain a rigid relationship with background and foreground sounds i.e., constantly filtering and pushing irrelevant sounds to the background while foregrounding sounds we need for survival/pleasure.

Of course my pleasure is trying to foreground as much sound as I can and sift through it for interesting textures: snippets of conversations, mechanical hums, whirring electrical motors, gauzy mixes of street musicians and water fountains, train sounds, jet ambiance, that sort of thing.

And 'Language of Ghosts' tries to capture some of that experience by selecting a small range of sounds and pushing them into a mid-ground (via carefully adjusted levels) where the listener can choose to pull/push, mix certain sounds into the foreground/background selecting their own auditory 'depth of field.'

DN: Caleb Kelly describes your music as an exploration "toward the gray regions of sound, hunting in the shadows for the ghosts of signals left behind, the shadows themselves becoming the focus rather than the body that throws them." (Cracked Media, p. 296, MIT press 2009 - Thanks for the hint.) He is referring to working with technical failures, but in your installation do you think you hand the task of hunting in the shadows over to the listener?

KC: Caleb's book is very nicely done and I am very pleased to see him give 'failure' it's place in the cannon of artistic techniques/devices...not that 'failure' or using 'accident' in art/music is anything new per se, but it's still nice to see it.

I leave any descriptions of my work to the listener because I have nothing I'm really trying to say or get across other than my fascination with sound and how we process it. But yes, in this way I want the listener to produce their own meanings, descend into their personal vocabulary where they can freely direct their attention to their own signifiers and references.

With 'Music for Dagger and Guitar' I tried to not textually frame the piece, as is done by too many 'field recordists', so I let the visuals (cover, packaging format, etc) set the framework for me. But other than that I really like it when someone comes up with their own meanings, often times things I'd never have thought of myself. I learn more about how people listen and they in turn learn something about themselves. This is very rewarding for me.

DN: You coined the term 'post-digital' to examine an aesthetics of failure in 2000, now in which sense do you think the term 'post-digital' is still relevant today or are you post that?

KC: I can't take credit for coining the term 'Post-Digital.' It was borrowed from a very interesting book I discovered in 2001 at the Tate London bookstore titled: 'The Postdigital Membrane: Imagination, Technology and Desire', by Robert Pepperell and Michael Punt.

This is the book that got me thinking a lot about the tidal movement of analog content to digital.

Once any new technology comes into the mainstream we media seems to place us in an '<insert technological name here> age.' So we've seen rise of the 'information age, the 'atomic age', the 'computer age', the 'Internet age' etc.

These labels used to serve as signposts on our cultural highway indicating which areas we were entering and leaving. But in the context of digital technology I think 'post-digital' doesn't imply that we've moved on *from* digital so much as we no longer need to migrate from one state to another. It's so fully integrated into our lives that there is little of the old technology left to recognize.

As an example in the musical world: in an analog world we used separate technologies for the creation, storage, distribution and transmission of music. While today all of those separate technologies have been conflated into a singular realm: the digital.

We have entered a point in our culture where there is no longer a concept of 'non-digital.' Digital has subsumed much of the analog world. There is no longer a wall between the digital and analog worlds. In that way we are 'post-digital' -- meaning since almost everything is now in a digital state we can no longer use the concept as a differentiation from analog.

DN: Does that mean that the fundamental difference of the digital being made of binary code, on/off, doesn't matter anymore, because the surfaces of the digital technology have so advanced, that it can feel completely part of us? ;)

KC: The surface of digital is different than its analog counterpart. When digital equipment started to make an appearance in the musical instrument market of the 80's there was a brief disconnect for users with an ability to navigate the functions brought to the panel.

In analog gear there were knobs and switches dedicated to particular functions and analog meters and indicators that were replaced by small LED readouts that forced the user to navigate a hierarchy of menus and parameters with a small set of knobs or switches that served many assignable functions.

There was a new 'dimensional' aspect to the *machine* that didn't exist to the same extent with analog gear, i.e., one had to descend and interface with the functionality of the algorithms of the machine rather than have functions brought out to a front panel. For example, a knob on an analog EQ is dedicated to a particular frequency whereas on a digital EQ that same knob could be assigned to any number of frequencies or other parameters. So what takes place is an 'overloading' of controls due to the complexity of mapping various functions to physical controls.

This caused many musicians a lot of pain in the beginning. Case in point: the Yamaha DX-7's user interface which precipitated a market for computer based patch editors.

DN: I didn't know, that Pepperell and Punt were earlier. Don't they focus on the fact, that the gap between imagination and reality is getting smaller or disappears with digital technology? I can't tell, if that's a good thing or not. But to stay in the musical world: there is also this retro-trend to go back to analog devices. Do you think this is part of a post-digital culture or is it just nostalgia?

KC: Analog nostalgia has been with us for a long time especially in the electronica and DJ markets. So the use of analog gear is not a symptom of post-digital culture per se so much a fetish for 'artistic

authenticity' and scene status. That's an entirely different discussion that we can have later. ;)

I think many of the musicians working in electronica today are firmly stuck in the digital era, and this is done by design. The symptom of the 'tool serving as the message' is an indication of this.

I perform at more and more electronic music festivals these days that are 'logo-ized' by music software companies. And this 'logoization' indicates how much of a stranglehold these companies have on the electronic music culture. These same companies also conduct workshops at the same festivals that are thinly veiled product demos that mainly serve to stimulate consumer demand.

The marketplace for these tools operates by selling music hobbyists the spectacle of 'digital music', i.e., desire - the promise of sounding just like 'artist so-and-so'. It's ironic that electronic music companies frame themselves as countercultural since they operate by the same 'business as usual' tactics and manipulating the same psychological levers and switches in their consumers. This is why many of the current electronic music producers are stuck in the sexy sheen of the *digital* era and are unable to move past that. Software is the message and content is the residue or by-product.

I used to think that programming my tools in Max/MSP was a way past that - but I don't know if I think that any longer. I'm more inclined now to think that returning to the *craft* of artistic creation is the way past all that.

DN: With this *craft* do you mean, that the artistic idea, the concept and the result is more important, if it's strong enough, than the tool used to create; or that one should built ones own tools?

KC: In other words, the festishization of tools and style has replaced much of the actual craft of content creation. By 'craft' I mean the discipline of learning the art and skill of world-making.

In this era of 'microtemporality' (ADD markets?) people are driven by the subtle ego manipulation of advertising rather than a genuine drive to create. It takes time to develop 'craft' and many people just don't want to invest the time to learn the craft of world-making.

Electronic music is a simple thing to make these days if one pays attention, learns all the little tricks and which software will deliver the needed results. And this trend has all but replaced the innovation we've come to expect from a 'counterculture.' The cycle of consumption and production (in electronic music) is driven by fashion trends and an industry of companies who play on the *desire* of consumers programmed to want things now, to make things now, to muck about with something rather than read a manual, to get their music online quickly...it's a socially driven market rather than a artistically driven one.

This is the 'shiny object syndrome' which is also part of the 'gadget narcosis' we've been experiencing for the past few decades.

In my experience, artistic innovation comes from the shadowy corners and not performed in the spotlight. So people who want to innovate need to learn to decode and subvert all this, step into the shadows distancing themselves from the mainstream of glitz and glory.
