

Digital Music & Sound Arts

Tarek El Goraicy interviews

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1. You mentioned in other interviews that you started making visuals to complement your own music, but you are most prominently known for making visuals for other musicians. How does your musical interest and background help you to envision other people's music visually?

My sense of musicality is at the very heart of what I do visually. This is not just because I need to, of course, hear and understand what I respond to, but it's also because I deeply experience my visual response itself as a musical creation. It's been very helpful for my own understanding of what I do to let go of the idea that music is a purely auditory phenomenon. Music is nothing more than just air molecules pushing each other back and forth, if we don't speak of the experience thereof. This musical experience is about what happens within our consciousness as those molecules interact with our ear drums and those in turn interact with our brains. As a result we feel our consciousness is set in motion and moves along with the composition as it unfolds in time. Similarly our consciousness may also be moved by time-based compositions perceived through other sensory inputs like the eyes.

To explore this blurring of lines between the media in an intuitive way, I've always taken an approach to visuals that is generally much more often used in the audio domain. By this I mean, for instance, that I've always heavily focussed on realtime creation. Like sound comes out of a guitar or out of a synthesiser without needing to render for days, I've always confined myself to what's possible with realtime visuals. Max/MSP was, of course an ideal environment to create audio and visuals within the same algorithmic machinery. I also often use Ableton Live in conjunction with Max for Live to sequence my visuals in exactly the same way that one would sequence their sounds. My creation of visuals has therefore always felt like nothing more than a continuation of my music-making. And when I create visuals with other musicians it feels therefore like I'm adding extra musical layers much like a drummer or a pianist would.

2. Although there is great technical complexity in the way you craft your work beneath the hood, I find your art to represent almost the polar opposite. It is so easily digestible by the viewer—one kind of just feels it and gets it. With that in mind, to what extent do you think your work challenges the separation between audience and composer? Is this something you do consciously?

As the above answer dives into the blurring of lines between the media, I think that that's totally connected with reaching out to the viewer. It's very much about this singular experience where all the elements fit together so that they don't fight for the viewers attention – they all call attention onto each other so that the viewer is invited to enter with an undivided focus.

This is something I very much do consciously, as my initial interest in visuals was to some extent a reaction to the disconnect between laptop-performer and audience. A guitar player, for instance, can be seen creating their sounds – the sound calls attention to their visual appearance, and their visual motions call attention to their sounds. The disconnect that computers introduced, where the creation of sounds became inherently invisible, was new and not necessarily bad – disconnection itself can have its artistic merit, and create a sense of tension and mystery. But I wanted to see what I could do to re-connect in new ways.

Visualising my own audio-compositions in virtual 3D space in realtime was what I came up with – I wanted people to visually connect with my actions as a live, on stage musician and literally SEE the sound-producing virtual objects as I would, flying towards and around them inside Versum. By the way, one of my inspirations for this was the performance “Atlantic Waves” by Robert Henke, where he had projected his self-made musical interface onto a screen as we could see his mouse pointer click away and create music in front of our very eyes. I experienced that as a joyful communal experience where we, as an audience, could so closely follow what the artist was doing, that the borders between us faded. On top of that, it was also aesthetically beautiful to see, which

drew us even further in.

3. What do you try to translate to your audience with your art?

I'm unaware where in its essence my art comes from, or what it translates, in much the same way that I'm unaware of where my deepest emotional drives come from. They just are, in the way that I just am. This doesn't mean that I reject or dislike interpretations or the concepts of causality, but I do find it important to acknowledge the limits of such ways of thinking, and that at the most fundamental level of our being, we don't know what and why we are.

So I very much just play – and though this play is often set in motion by choosing certain theoretical concepts or algorithms as starting points, the play is then further guided by which results, colours, shapes attract me the most, by what I feel is missing or is too much – without questioning this feeling too much, but WITH trying to as accurately as possible pinpoint what is triggering that feeling and trying to become ever more attentive to what those feelings are.

So maybe it's not so much a matter of consciously translating something, but more a process of sharing fascinations and discoveries, states that exist prior to words – the sources of which may in some ways be as unknown to myself as to the audience.

4. You prominently use your own software, Versum to create your works. What role does technology play in your work? Do you feel it, to some extent, dictates your practice or do you feel a sense of understanding/companionship with it?

Versum, the technologies on which it runs, and the technologies through which the output can be expressed, have put their very distinctive stamps on every single fiber of my practise. And as repeated experiences change people over time, these technologies have even changed the way that I think about imagery, the ways in which I can even theoretically conceive of creating things.

I think, however, that this is nothing inherently special: an artist who works with paint — their whole life will merge with their medium in such a way that there is no contradiction between the properties of the material and their own “free” will – their will shall largely incorporate and embrace the properties of paint and canvas, learn from and be inspired by them. I feel similarly with my own work. Of course there's always frictions and frustrations where mind meets reality, but it's also only in that meeting that anything can be created. If reality would somehow not give us any pushback, creation would be extremely uninspiring and boring. At least in my case – my results are much better than my initial ideas, precisely because I'm happy to let unexpected influences, far richer than my imagination could've come up with, become part of my work.

6. How do you feel about the state of the current audio-visual art scene? What are some of your favourite artists in this realm?

In general, I feel that our scene is still in a surprisingly immature state. Many works focus heavily on a specific type of aesthetic that feels like a stale view on what technology is. It's serious, it's precise, it's angular, black and white, scientific, symmetrical, perfectly central, self-absorbed in it's constant reflections on itself (by which I mean that technological art is very often about technology). The idea that technology can be just another medium, another form of paint through which one expresses more than the nature of the medium itself, feels under-explored.

Perhaps part of this is because we still often lack the software tools to build an intuitive relationship with our medium. And it's a lot to ask from people to both build and use their own tools!

As for the artists I like: Transforma, Push 1 Stop, Dead Slow Ahead, Desax Idnumsi and Paul

Prudence

7. Tell me about your installation with Thom Yorke, City Rats

Since a long time I had wanted to work with Thom Yorke as a singer inside Versum, since even before we had ever met. But I kept on putting it off because I felt that I wasn't ready yet. But when Nick Meehan from ISM contacted me to create a work for their Hexadome, I knew that now was the time to ask Thom if he'd be willing to do this. So without much knowledge of what would come out, but with a lot of trust, he said yes – and we embarked on this experiment.

8. If you can put it into words, what did you and Thom aim to express through City Rats?

The answer here, for Thom as well as for myself, is the same one as the answer to your third question. Neither of us really knew where this was coming from. Though there were certain themes of alienation within hectic and disconnected city life, we mainly improvised in realtime and experimented a lot with the concepts of putting his voice, synthesiser sounds and rhythms inside the virtual 3D space. It was also purely the concept of trying this out that initially brought us to collaborate on this.

The piece is still under construction, with future versions to be shown in 2019. So maybe one day in the future we can look back at it and see more clearly, in the contexts of our lives and zeitgeist, how all the metaphorical layers interconnected.

9. It must have been challenging working with a very uncommon way of placing 6 projection screens and 50-some speakers. How did you feel about creating a piece in that environment? How do you feel the space altered the experience?

It felt totally natural actually. My virtual space was never meant with any specific amount or shape of screens or speakers in mind. It is simply a virtual AV space that can utilize any speaker or screen as an auditive or visual window for the audience to look or hear through.

To clarify, it's as if the audience is placed in a spaceship inside Versum. This spaceship has six windows, with obviously the window in front of them showing what's going on in front of them, and the windows to the rear showing what's going on behind them, etc. Same goes for the speakers. And as, for instance, the space ship would turn around its axis you could see and hear all the objects revolve around you.

The space mainly altered the experience due to its physical scale and the large reverberation times in the hall – due to these circumstances, less definitely became more: a small movement on a large scale can still feel quite massive, and a single small sound can linger inside the space for a long time... I adapted the piece accordingly as not to sonically and visually overload the viewer too much.

11. Lastly, are there any new projects in the works for you?

Without yet saying exactly what the new projects will be, I can definitely confirm that I'll be focussing much more on pure light, stroboscopes, moving heads and smoke machines. There is an actual three-dimensionality to lights shining their rays through a haze into the distance, that I very much am interested in exploring in musical ways. I'll again be using Ableton Live to sequence and control my usage of these lights, and couple that with sound to create another type of visual music than I've so far been accustomed to.

More info about Tarik Barri: <http://tarikbarri.nl/>