

Extracts from a Conversation Between Henrik Håkansson & Terry R. Myers

at the Astro Diner in Silverlake, Los Angeles, April 12 1998.

Waitress How's everything, OK?

Terry R. Myers Fine...fine.

Henrik Håkansson (*sipping a heavy strawberry milkshake*) Very good.

HH If we go to the Frog works, they started out as a small experimental situation in my home, where I was trying to use music to achieve a situation of communication or something like a situation of an exchange of signals.

TRM Almost like a common response, using something...

HH Yeah, so we can be out there together.

TRM Right.

HH So I went out to certain habitats of frogs to try it out.

TRM I'm just curious how you even arrived at thinking you were going to do that. What led up to thinking "this is what I'm going to do today: go out there and..."

HH I have a long interest in frogs, theirs and other bio-communities, and a great interest in music and its direct way of affection. The frog basically has an ear which is tuned specifically to the call of the same species and in some way I found a most natural and interesting link to try to get in there with techno, which uses a wide range of frequencies and a beat based on the speed of heart beats. I wished that I possibly would reach a range of different frogs at the same time and place...and find out how I could interact in their activity using music as my cultural source and signal.

TRM Given the cultural "promise" of techno, a form of music attentive to the possibilities for its social importance. What I found interesting in the piece in "NowHere" at Louisiana [Z.O.N.E. (*Zoo-logical Optimized Nocturnal Ecstasy*) for frogs, 1996] was the way you ended up sort of giving voice to music which usually does not have lyrics, and suddenly there was this human imitating frogs, and frogs recalling...

HH I like that situation, that's the ultimate situation. The Z.O.N.E. for frogs came out of the other Frog works especially *Frog for e.s.t. (eternal sonic trance)* which was done in Stockholm in 1995, and with Z.O.N.E.

for frogs I wanted to close the circle. In Stockholm the DJ, Jean Louis Huhta, played alone in the corner with the frogs. I was of course present but I wasn't there "included" in the piece.

TRM So Louisiana was a big shift?

HH I think so. I can only see the *Z.O.N.E. for frogs* as an extension of the Stockholm piece, and I wanted to include myself more directly in the situation. The way we did it in order to present it to the public was to record our performance on video and CD. Unfortunately, as usual only the visitors at the opening were able to take part in the actual performance's real action.

TRM The location in the circular staircase of the museum made it so that you had no choice but to go through it.

HH Yes, it was a bit of an awkward situation.

TRM I actually liked that about it. I'm wondering if you feel that you improved in your ability to do those frog calls, "mastering" their language?

HH I worked on those works for two or three years and I certainly developed a sense of hearing to be able to express or mimic their voices at the right frequency, but I can't say that I understand them more than before.

TRM A more general question of mine at Louisiana was that when you were doing all this "talking"—in a symbolic way, or mimicking—what impact it had on your thoughts about talking with humans? Have there been moments when there has been a way to translate that experience into a human experience, even outside of the work? I think that the work makes that a possibility for us. I guess I'm suggesting that on an unconscious, encoded level, things that happen in our voices or between words or things can convey loads of information.

HH It's the same situation: when we talk or walk, we have those different signals and we are using a language based on codes which are based upon various self-produced signals, and we also have our scents and huge variations in our patterns of movement. Our language has different dialects as does that of frogs from the same species but found in different locations. And I believe that they tell more than we think, but as with human language it's hard to get to the point where you get the right message.

TRM Another question concerns the status of insects or frogs as performers, thinking here as well about the cricket piece at Nordenstad Gallery in New York, *The Monsters of Rock Tour*, 1996, and the different characterizations that the various creatures have had in the work.

HH In that work they became more like real actors, I mean performers, as we said. They are on the stage, there are a lot of them and they are acting out the same way as would anyone who has ever thought “I wanna be a rock and roll star...”

TRM The interesting thing about it is, that if you anthropomorphize the situation and consider the crickets in human terms, then yes, they are performers and are performing, but they are also just living. What I like is that it’s this sort of heavy metal concert stage but with all of their food and everything else they need right there, it’s like seeing Metallica complete with the spread from the dressing room, watching what they eat while they live in front of us.

HH I like that idea very much, a sort of documentary view of things happening—also including myself and the viewer as a part of the whole process.

TRM Again, for me the visible presence of the crickets makes me think back to *Z.O.N.E. for frogs*, where the frogs were also performers, but you couldn’t see them even though you knew that they were there. Moreover, in that environment you and Jean-Louis Huhta ended up taking center stage, a position which plays into a discussion of the status of the DJ in the techno culture and its way of developing superstars which cultivate certain personalities or certain styles *as* specific languages.

HH I’m not deeply involved in the scene, but every time I attend a DJ’d event I’m always really amazed at the way it works out. It’s so basic in its sound and I guess most of the people who are there are affected, even if they don’t like it.

TRM Looking back in this context at the earlier work that I’ve seen in photographs only, the pieces using the word balloons, I’m curious what your thoughts are about those pieces now.

HH I don’t do those kind of works any more, but they got me into the way I work now. At that point I was very much in the beginning of developing a kind of process, like giving a plant an expression or giving something non-human an expression that a person could deal with.

TRM I don’t know—maybe this is completely misguided, but they remind me of that series of Gillian Wearing photographs of the people on the streets, holding signs. I guess the way I link them up is that you are putting a position—a word or phrase—in the “mouth” of a plant or insect that you don’t really know is “accurate.” You immediately recognize the falseness of the text in your work, while in Wearing’s photographs you’re not sure. You get really suspicious and wonder if her

subjects were thinking “this woman is crazy so I’m going to write something really crazy,” like the guy holding the sign saying “I want to kill myself.”

HH I don’t know how she thought about that, but I think my direction was a little bit in the same way, a sort of silent situation. It’s like a work I did in an abandoned apartment where all of the left-over plants in different rooms together said “ooooohh please help me.”

TRM I’m curious about this idea of leaving things behind as well in relation to your own position in the work—the complexities of that position, to master-mind the situation and then leave it behind.

HH Until this point a lot of the work has been put in place to then be maintained by local attendants, with some instruction, but the situation in most cases is put there to automatically maintain itself in cooperation with this person(s). In some way I’m always available both before and afterwards. In the last year when this hasn’t worked out—due to traveling and a need for more flexibility—I decided to cut down the number of those kind of works and change to another method which now will include more of the outdoor environment more directly.

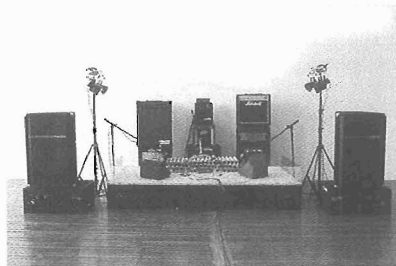
TRM So it’s not really Godlike?

HH No. I’ve never considered my work as Godlike. I’ve received a lot of different comments that I’m trying to act like God. Maybe I do, I don’t know. I’ve never thought about that idea.

TRM The closest would be a God who sort of created everything and then left it all behind.

HH Maybe, I don’t really believe in a God.

TRM I don’t believe in anything that literal either, and of course the big difference would be that you do leave a set up, some instructions or a set of information available for someone to look at, a little bit more specific than the ten commandants, I guess.



HH The situation has always been left open to interact with, and there has been no direction telling you how to enter the situation or how to act there.

TRM I was thinking about the *Wall of Voodoo* and the actual collapse of that piece.

HH That created a quite interesting situation. As usual I was there only in the beginning. And like most of my works it has to be seen as process related, and you never really know what will happen. This work was regulated by a computer controlled climate system which was created specifically for the Peruvian Fern Stick insects. The control unit was a laptop left open to possibly be touched by the viewer—so obviously something will happen, because people like to touch things like that.

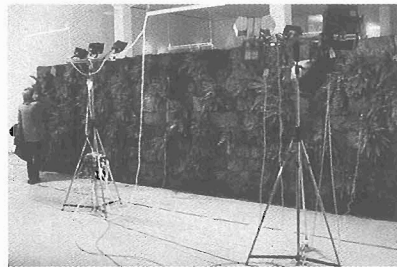
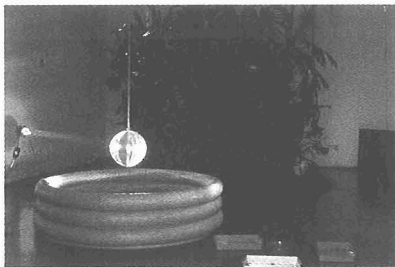
TRM But would viewers have known what the computer would do or what they could do?

HH No, the computer just told you the level of humidity, the temperature, the day cycle and the light curves. Like if you touched the keyboard it didn't really tell you "oh I'm sorry, you just destroyed the earth." You would probably note some changes when it was possible to have 365 day cycles in one day.

TRM And there was nothing that told them of the "ideal" situation?

HH There was a written description of the situation presented together with photographs of the insects, their habitat and the process of the work. I don't like to point out exactly what is the best situation. The text worked more like a reference. With this work I prepared the Museum that it could go anywhere...

TRM The complex idea of what the "ideal" situation actually is, particularly in relation to the work's ultimate status as art—art entering in the discourse here as yet another self-determined or informal structure...



HH I believe the art situation is really the situation where the work gets its reading—in a context where it meets the viewer directly as an idea. People are there and talk about it, as opposed to scientific studies where you have sort of the same situation, but it doesn't reach a public until there's a result. In art you have the option of not having an exact result, with or without fictionalizing.

TRM The complexity of the situations you create bring us back to that often: we don't know what is going on here. For example, we don't know if you're really mimicking the frogs.

HH Like we don't know what we're talking about.

TRM Maybe that's where language is always supposed to be, in that place where I say something to you and you completely misunderstand everything, and vice versa.

HH I don't know how but it reminds me of an older Superman story, about a planet that looked like his home planet Krypton, like a sister planet. Here the inhabitants have found a flower that produces a harmonic sound, which in the end pacifies almost the entire population and creates such a great harmonic distortion that the planet is blown to pieces.

TRM Like Martin Kersels's *Brown Sound* in which he uses a strategy which was researched by the French Police during the May 1968 student riots, experiments with low frequency sounds that would cause you to defecate.

HH That's a certain research.

TRM Or Bush blasting Noriega's compound with bad rock music.

HH *Apocalypse Now* and the Wagner thing.

TRM Right.

HH Yeah, so... (*last sip of the milkshake*)... this is the end... (*laughs*)

TRM What else do you want to talk about?

HH Nothing. (*more laughs*)

