

No Laptop: Caleb Kelly, aka kk, on cracked and broken media, impermanent audio, losing funding and the regret of not being able to listen to *Lightning Bolt* live.

Seeker of rare and extreme sonic experiences, the multivalent kk of *impermanent audio* [2000-6], i audio festivals and Pelt, on radio, and behind-the-scenes in *What Is Music?* Is also an academic, media archaeologist and sound historian who has lectured on being inside sound so loud that you get to the place beyond (*My Bloody Valentine*). For kk, known for his rigorous, visionary, and internationalist approach, the point of entry is acute and subtle listening. I caught up with him the very morning of the Australia Council knock back of his latest grant application. Nevertheless he was a stoic pillar of chipper and trademark tart professionalism, reflecting on the loss of what he had planned.

Q: "So what's next?"

kk: "Australia Council just made what I had planned cancelled."

Q: "And what did you have planned?"

kk: "To bring out some big stuff. The plan was to do a monthly thing just for four months, not a festival because there are issues with a festival. You have to go out four nights in a row. Get rid of that. Have some monthly things. Have some big stars.

Since *What Is Music?* Has stopped, everyone is going and watching their friends play; not getting out anywhere. People aren't seeing anything great. *What is Music?* Had this thing where you'd get to see something that you thought, never in you life you would get to see. You'd wet your pants when you found out they were coming and you'd get to see something like Merzbow (hardcore Japanese noise). No one is seeing this stuff unless they go overseas like Robbie (Avenaim). Nobody sees anything that's not his or her friends. The only thing really left is the "*Now Now*" and that's predicated on everything is equal. That's what they do. There's no high point to the night. It's all meant to be the same. They don't bring amazing

things out; they bring things that will fit. There are no really interesting internationals.

Q: "Highlights of *impermanent audio*?"

kk: "Please don't. The first time Francisco Lopez played. That was the one where he blindfolded everybody. He's from Spain. You lie on the floor or lean against walls. Surround sound. It was one of those sound performances when where it ends people don't know whether to clap or not. You get a smattering of clapping and no-one talks. Like I was selling cds and I sold more cds than I've ever sold before. People would pick the cd up, not look in my eyes, and give me the money. I didn't talk to them; they didn't talk to their partners.

Q: "So how would you describe the sonic dimension of the Lopez experience?"

kk: "It goes to that thing where everything is spatialized. I thought he'd been playing for twenty minutes; he'd been playing for fifty... I thought something had gone wrong; that he had stopped; that he'd gone back into silence and that we'd need to wait. No-one really knew if he had finished."

"It was just like woo... clapping undervalues what it was. It's happened to me a few times. He does lots of sound field recordings. Layers and layers. Crescendos. Sharp drops. Extreme volume. Spatialization."

Q: "What were his sound sources?"

kk: "When he was here we went out to the Blue Mountains and he recorded mountain sounds everything from birds and waterfalls through to machine sounds. All field recording. Then he just has cd players and he does the French production of the mix, pulling it around the room. Really good."

kk: "And the other international standout would be kk null. Both times he came out were phenomenal, amazing..."

Q: "Can you describe those two times."

kk: The first time he played at Lanfranchis. He's got a chaos pad. So sound is going into the pad and he moves it around; so it's really performative, analogue performance and he's very active and psychical. Gets aggressive in the noise that he does. That was the first time; the second time he came he played at Spectrum which was a rock venue which was really loud and then he was meant to do a quiet set a Pelt which was louder than Spectrum. He got carried away.

Q: "Local?"

kk: "In terms of local things one of the biggest thing for me has always been Stasis Duo. When they first started in that ultra silent sine wave thing no one had heard it in Australia; that thing where it is so quiet that you start hearing the world; bits you hadn't heard before. You hear the world in a way that's different to the way you used to hear it, and that happens for days afterwards. So Stasis Duo was right at the start of the laptop explosion."

Q: "Laptop explosion. Have we seen the beginning and middle phase? Where's it going now?"

kk: "It's finished. It's finished in the same way as computer art is finished. You never call something that's made with a computer computer art because that would just mean everything. Computer sound is almost everything. It's a pointless idea.

Everyone uses laptops now so there's no point in talking about it: some people use laptops solely; some people use max msp; some people use them as playback devices; literally for field recordings; some for background whatever. There's no point in talking about laptop music whatever."

Q: "Ok. So for you was the high point of laptop a couple of years ago, after the second i audio perhaps?"

kk: "Like computerized design we're not going to talk about that because everything is computer. Doesn't make any sense. I think it

started fading around the turn of the century. I think all those guys went back to analogue things very deliberately for a little bit of post laptop."

Q: "Names?"

kk: "Toshi Nakamura, Peter Blamey, Stasis Duo, where it's a very deliberate 'we're not using laptops.' Like the brief phase of Postmodernism after Modernism. So you react strongly against laptops by going and getting your guitar pedals and your mixing desk and you don't have any computers. So that small period of reaction, which of course is finished, it's only got a limited time. What we're in now, I don't know. Where are the kids?"

Q: "Now the [doctoral] thesis is done, what are you investigating?"

kk: "The thesis follows on from Doug Khan's *Noise Water Meat* which just deliberately stops with Tony Conrad, Lamonte Young and so on which is later 60's early 70s. He doesn't touch on Lucier. I think he is writing a follow-up at the moment, which is about Joyce Hinterding. Joyce is pissing herself because Doug is saying that she did her field recordings before Lucier, a big bold statement to be making. Doug reckons she did."

Mine (thesis) definitely takes Doug's methodology which is analytical-historical approach, sort of a media art history - which is not a Doug word - but it's being used a bit more. For me it's taking up a bit of media archaeology as well, so looking back at older practices, and seeing them as precursors and very definitely anti-techno determinism. One of the big things in my PhD was reviewing early cracked and broken media. Lots of amnesiac and broken records. Paik and all that stuff. Media practice but not digital media practice.

Even more it basically addresses the idea of how you approach media. Ours is open, grab and straight away edit it ourselves; we straight away cut it up, move it around; stick it on youtube, all that stuff. They were doing it with closed media objects like reel-to-reel tape, and vinyl records which you play, doing it with mediums that were linear and closed, and not meant to be mucked around with.

They were approaching it exactly in the way that we approach digital media."

Q: "Where does the thesis stop and who's in it?"

kk: "Goes up to a couple of years ago. It goes back to Cage and Paik then Christian Marclay moving on to Phil Samartzis, Vicky Browne and Lucas Abela and in terms of cd players its Oval [skipping] and Yusanao Tone. Cd practice is limited, a phase that stops, whereas records are still being used as much as ever, so it talks about the materiality of record players and the physical/analogue thing. At some point cd technology just stops. There's only so much you can do with a laser. You can't rip the laser out then glue the thing somewhere. Whereas with a turntable you can literally rip off the cartridge head, which is what Cage did in the 1960s, literally you can move it around. Work by Tone is fantastic but it has a shelf life I think.

Q: "So no laptops?"

kk: "The thesis is specifically about cracked and broken playback media not computers. That's the history. Also the idea is to write about one of the histories and how we got here. Talking about laptops is a different story."

Q: "Are you ever going to that (laptop) story?"

kk: "Nooo."

Q: "Current plans?"

kk: "I have been wanting to look a bit more at some of the Japanese people before that generation passes on. Tone's generation. They are getting to their mid 70s. I've just written a catalogue essay for Japan Society in New York Twentieth Anniversary Exhibition. On Tone, so there's quite a bit of interest in him and I'm not quite sure why. Takehisa Kosugi has been getting less attention even though on paper he's the one that people should be paying more attention to, the one with a much bigger history. He's been musical director of the Cunningham Dance Company for years and years, part of

what came out of Fluxus and all that stuff so I'd quite like to write him up.

Also there's been quite a bit of writing about Tone now he's won some awards everyone knows about. He won *Ars Electronica* a few years ago. I don't know if that's why. There haven't been major papers written on him."

Q: "Is your rationale catching them before they die?"

kk: "And they're amazing."

Q: "Who would you write about on the local scene - including N.Z.?"

kk: "I don't know that there are people on that sort of level."

Q: "So what's required?"

kk: "For Kosugi the drone stuff that he was doing; he was at the forefront of the Fluxus thing. He wrote lots of the non-music music 'stick your arm out a window' kind of scores; the one when you do the performance, you start it today then in five years time, scoop out your eye and then five years later scoop out the other one ("Music For A Revolution" 1964). The one that's never been performed. But then he did all these big drone works, Indian influenced Japanese drone, phenomenal works, really beautiful. Big, big early electronic drones.

There's great music coming out of Australia and New Zealand but there's not that sort of influential figure. Or the ones who are influential like Phil Dadson, Philip Samartzis or even Julian Knowles they're coming out of other traditions; they're not sort of starting them. Phil Dadson is from the Scratch, from the Scratch Orchestra Now he's amazing and looked up to as a sort of father figure in New Zealand but it still comes back to these other people. Phil Samartzis comes back to the French electro acoustic stuff; Julian Knowles comes back to more the American line."

There are lots of people, who've done really good, really interesting, great work but it's never going to be changing things. It adds to the discourse but it's not changing the direction. It's already going that

way and they're part of it. Someone like Oren Ambachi is more likely to be up there, again because it made a big shift and an international impact

Q: "Oren's sound in descriptive terms?"

kk: "It's guitar which uses pedals and a kind of glitching overdriven pedal which gets confused. Hopefully related to Lucier, and Phill Niblock and that kind of trajectory of American experimental music, and Morton Feldman. Kind of like squishing Morton Feldman (New York school, same generation as Cage, really quiet, often piano, with cigarette) into Lucier and Niblock, shaking it around. So Oren's fusing that stuff but he's made an international name. He appeared a right time; he appeared at glitching laptops and he pulled out a guitar instead of a laptop. He was part of that first phase of that reaction. He played that stuff for me at impermanent audio in 1999 and he'd already developed it to that point, maybe 97/98.

Jumping back to kk's cancelled program for bringing out big stars: "Can you rattle off a few names?"

kk: 'I wanted to bring out Lightning Bolt. But just too expensive. American duo. Noisy rock. Silly rock. Noisy. No singing. Drums and bass guitar with feedback, lots of pedals and stuff. And they don't play through a P.A.; they play in the middle of the room so the drummer just sets up in the centre. So bringing out that kind of thing with two airfares & accommodation; such a big risk, you really need to be a promoter with a big network that guarantees a sell out. Can't risk getting nowhere.

As an audience member I'm totally bored at the moment. Nothing to look forward to.

Except Sunn O band with Oren Amachi at the Factory. Oren's been traveling the world playing. He played with the Red Hot Chili Peppers at Melbourne. Sent me pictures with Oren standing there and there were thousands of people. After Sun O that's it. Now what do we do for the rest of the year?"

[Note: *impermant audio* (check out the website archives) began with laptop - David Haines - and closed with Haines on the program,

whilst regularly featuring Minit, the Sonny & Cher of laptop, Rosy Parlane, Ivan Lysyak, John Hunter, etc, as well as numerous and amazing non-laptop artists.]

written by Ann Finegan

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