

ELECTRIC RAIN

Asbjørn Blokkum Flø

This is a conversation between Zane Cerpina (PNEK) and Asbjørn Blokkum Flø that took place at Atelier Nord's gallery ANX in August 2018.

Zane Cerpina (ZC): *Could you tell us about your background?*

Asbjørn Blokkum Flø (AF): I began taking piano lessons when I was a kid, around 6-7 years old, and then started a band with my friends when I was around 11 years old. Later on I gradually changed from just playing classical music and playing in a band to exploring the limits of music and sound. In high school I got into experimental music, and when I moved to Oslo I started experimenting with computer programming and electronics. The first installation I worked on was *The Leap*, a collaborate piece made together with Ståle Stenslie, Karl Anders Øygard, Knut Mork Skagen and Lars Nilsson. It was exhibited at Kunsternes Hus in Oslo in 1999 and I've been working on sound installations ever since.

ZC: *Could you describe your work *Electric Rain*, that is displayed here, at Atelier Nord ANX?*

AF: I have been fascinated by the concept of sound as mass and particles in space for a very long time. I was exposed early on to the Greek-French composer Iannis Xenakis who in the 1950s developed very original theories and music based on the idea of sound as mass. He made both electronic works and installations, although most of his music is acoustic.

In 2004 I worked on an installation called *Soundtracks* together with Norwegian sound and installation artist Trond Lossius. The installation had a grid of speakers placed on the floor, and during the process of creating the installation we gave different working titles to various parts of that piece. One of the working titles for one of the parts was "Digital Rain", describing masses of sound particles moving through space. That work is another potential source of inspiration for *Electric Rain*.



ASBJØRN BLOKKUM FLØ

Asbjørn Blokkum Flø is a Norwegian composer, musician and sound artist. He studied composition at the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo and works with sound installations, electronic music and acoustic music.

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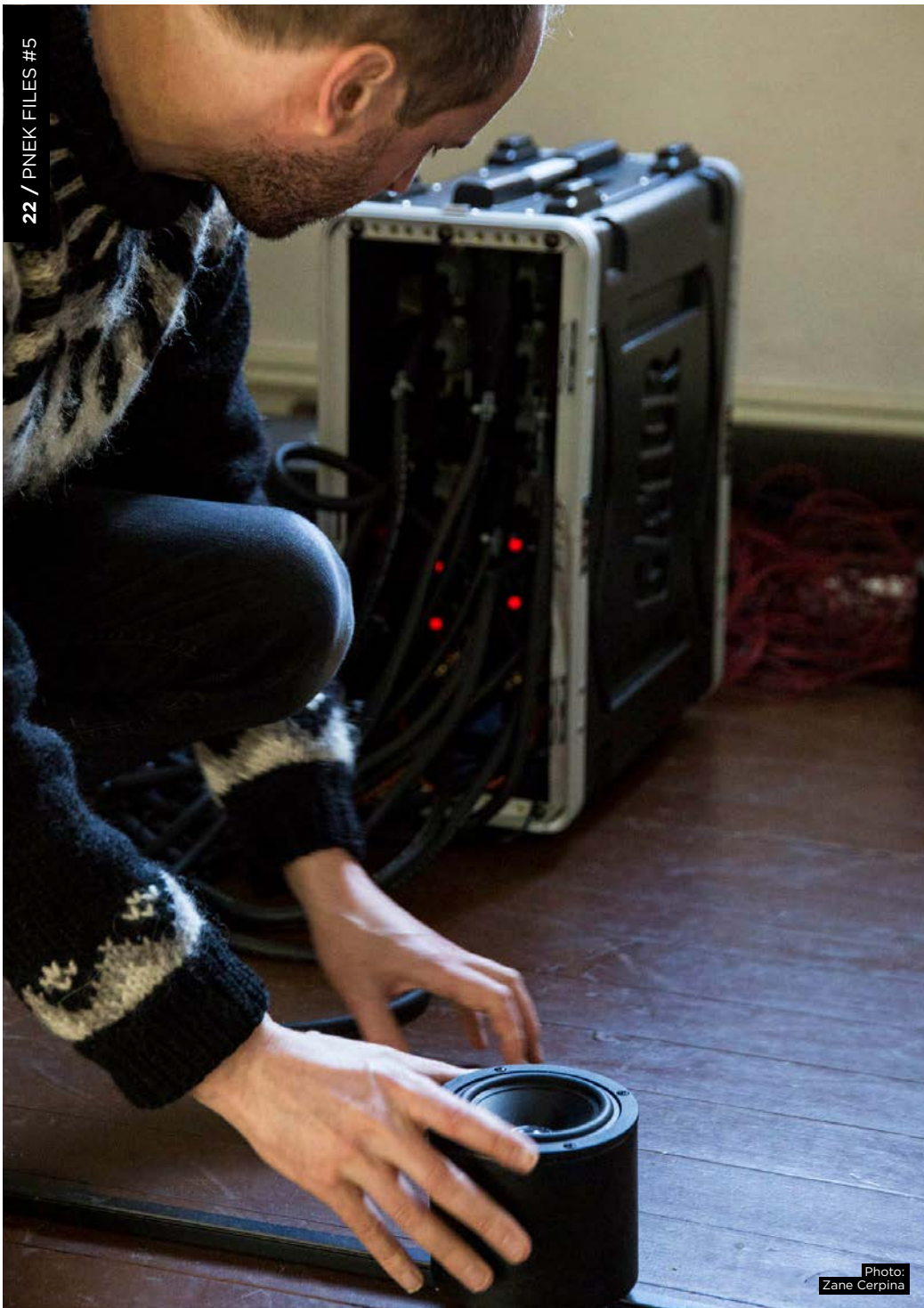


Photo:
Zane Cerpina

Another starting point is the actual sound of rain as a found sound object. It has all the qualities and properties of what Xenakis was working on throughout his entire life, such as various distributions of sound and how it moves and continuously evolves. On one hand you have a natural element that is the sound of rain, and on the other hand you have the compositional idea of sound as mass and sound as particles. I wanted to combine these two elements.

Then there is the question of the sound of rain as a metaphor. You can find the sound of rain throughout all of cultural history - in literature, art, music and in sound design for film. In popular culture the sound of rain is very often connected to traditional expressions of romance and melancholy. The history of experimental electronic music is also full of rain sounds, such as the piece *Dripsody* (1955) by the Canadian composer Hugh Le Caine. Finally we have rain as a result of climatic processes. The sound of rain is influenced by the climate and I think it is impossible to work with something like this or experience the installation without thinking about the climate.

I didn't really want force the listener into any particular reading of the work. The entire cultural history of rain is obviously there, but I wanted to leave the interpretation to the listener. Throughout the exhibition, different listeners have given me very different descriptions of what they've been experiencing.

ZC: *Is it a site-specific work?*

AF: Yes. Atelier Nord ANX is an old house of prayer and it has a lot of visual and acoustic properties. I've built a 3D computer model of the space to try out all kinds of different variations of placement of sound sources using walls, ceilings and floors as well as organizing the loudspeakers in three-dimensional shapes. I ended up with a very minimal placement of the speakers on the floor in a grid because I wanted to open up the space both visually and acoustically. The installation consists of 96 objects and that could have easily made the space very crowded, which was something I wanted to avoid.

ZC: *Did you make all the speakers yourself?*

AF: Yes. All the speakers and electronics are made with a specific purpose in mind. By minimizing the size and visual impact of the speakers I was able to make them draw as little attention as possible to themselves, instead turning the attention towards the architecture and the acoustics of the space itself. The other thing is that the speakers have some special acoustic properties. They are coaxial loudspeakers, which means they can radiate sound equally in all directions. It should feel natural to walk around them while listening and they should have no defined beginning or ending. No up, down, left or right.

ZC: *How is the sound distributed in the space? And why so many speakers?*

AF: The sound is distributed through 96 individually controlled loudspeakers. The high number of speakers is to ensure that wherever you are in the space there will always be a group of loudspeakers close to you. In this way you can shape the space and move the sound, and wherever you are there will always be

close sound sources. The installation is also tuned to the acoustic properties of the space. Various parts of the space have different qualities. For instance where we sit right now in the middle of the space there is a very hard, reflective ceiling. Depending on the source material, you will sometimes get the impression of the sound coming from the ceiling, although the ceiling is actually reflecting the sound from the loudspeakers pointing up towards the ceiling.

The space also reacts very differently to different types of material. I use field recordings of rain sounds as well as studio recordings of single drops of water from different materials such as wood, plastic, glass, metal, cardboard and textile. The third type of material is synthetic models of rain sounds based on analysis and synthesis of the acoustic and physical properties of rain sounds. The field recordings creates a diffuse sound field that fills up the space while still moving. This has to do with the relationship between the loudspeakers and the acoustic properties of the space. The small single drops of sound particles on the other hand are very directional.

ZC: *The sound art field in Norway is quite strong. Why do you think it developed like that?*

AF: It is a relatively new field in Norway. Internationally it started 100 years ago, but the term “sound art” as it is used today was not in use before the early 1980s. In Norway this field started in the 1960s with composers and visual artists such as Arne Nordheim, Kåre Kolberg, Sigurd Berge, Marius Heyerdahl, Rolf Aamot and Paul Brand. There was also a lot happening at the Henie Onstad Art Center combining music, art, dance and theatre starting in the late 1960s, and a number of works were created for that space. Furthermore there were several Norwegian artists that worked with sound art both conceptually and in other ways in the 1980s and 1990s. In the 2000s a new wave of young artists and art students started to work with sound art, and galleries exhibiting sound art such as Galleri Rekord in Oslo and Lydgalleriet in Bergen opened during this period. All of this evolved into the field of sound art in Norway as it is today.

ZC: *How would you describe the status of the sound art field in Norway right now?*

AF: There seem to be an increase in activity. For example, there is the Lofoten Sound Art Symposium taking place this year. Also Norwegian sound artists such as Jana Winderen and Camille Norment have been exhibiting at the Museum of Modern Art in New York as well as representing Norway at the Venice Biennale. This could be seen as a sign that Norwegian sound art is moving into the mainstream of contemporary art. But these trends also seem to come and go in waves. Sound art has somewhat of an outsider position, outside of both music and visual art. This makes sound art difficult to understand for traditional institutions, a similar position to that which photography used to have.

ZC: *Any new projects that you are working on?*

AF: I have several new works in the making. One is for the sound art gallery Lydgalleriet in Bergen, focusing on the materiality of sound. Materiality has been a central topic in visual arts for a long time, but not so much in sound. I want to investigate the materiality of sound and look deeper into the materials used in the production of sound. Even something as virtual and abstract as sound coming from a loudspeaker starts with a material object with very specific historical and material properties.

ZC: *Thank you, Asbjørn.*

