

BORN TO CORRODE :

IN CONVERSATION WITH CHOP SHOP / SCOTT KONZELMANN

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Among the complaints that discontents of the digital age have about the aesthetic shortcomings of its new media, one of the more valid ones is the claim that instantaneity (e.g. of digital photography and digital filming) has warped our perceptions of the organic life cycle. That is to say, images and recorded sounds strive much harder to produce the illusion of ‘emergence’ or ‘coming into being’ that came about via the deficiencies of pre-digital media. The gradual filling in of a Polaroid picture’s flat obsidian space, the unnerving crackle and sputter that indicated a vinyl album’s music program was about to get underway, the lead-in strip of a film reel marked with illegible technical instructions: all these things added a certain preliminary suspense or tension that was not an obstacle to the aesthetic experience, but part and parcel of it. The flip side to this lost organic ‘emergence’ has been, naturally, the way in which the wariness of 21<sup>st</sup>-century instantaneity has rejuvenated interest in the aesthetic of decay. Among Jean Baudrillard’s final published writings, he scorned digital imagery and/or CGI not only because “there is no negative any longer, no ‘time lapse’” within it, but also because

“...nothing dies or disappears there. The image is merely itself the product of an instruction and a programme, aggravated by automatic dissemination from one medium to the other: computer, mobile phone, TV screen etc.”<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, the design world’s acceptance of disappearance, fatigue, and the slow fade-out is not insignificant, although not without occasional insincerity and pandering towards those who fear peer group rejection for exhibiting too much techno-flash in the midst of a global economic nosedive. A few years back, I visited an eatery in Tokyo’s Ebisu district where the menu was printed onto corroded slabs of metal, one facet of a harsh post-industrial decorative scheme that clashed somewhat with the restaurant’s soundtrack of breezy downtempo electronica, and with the impeccable grooming of the wait staff. And we’ve all likely seen the premature and rather insincere decay processes that can be found on “stressed” baseball caps, t-shirts and other fashion accoutrements - intended as a way for people to exude casual ‘everyman’ bonhomie. Within the digital imaging realm itself, design squads have become increasingly adept at cultivating a special made-to-order decay that

produces intense contrasts: bringing the ‘cleaner’ design elements of a given project into sharp relief. A randomly-picked back issue of the official Adobe magazine *Layers* (September / October 2009) provides an object lesson in this aesthetic via the goofy, overwrought Attention Deficit Design work of Linda Zacks, one-time design director for VH1.com as well as hired hand for Sony and (surprise) Adobe. In an unintentionally comical moment, the word “ORGANIC,” written in an insurrectionary spray-stenciled style as part of Zacks’ cover art, is partially obliterated by the magazine’s scannable barcode. There could be less cogent statements on the futility of such faux-organic aesthetics.

Though some kind of faux-organicism has always been in force in this writer’s lifetime, and has gone hand-in-hand with parallel design trends (such as expert ways of portraying non-expertise), the past decade or so has shown a marked intensification in the ‘push’ to make this the dominant design aesthetic. However, the conceits of this faux-organicism, especially when dealing with the decay stage of an artifact’s life cycle, are not difficult to identify. The metallic menus in that chic Ebisu restaurant were easily more expensive to produce than paper ones, and had nothing to do with a spartan ethos of “improvising from whatever materials were at hand”. Likewise, pre-“stressed” clothing is usually more costly than items that don’t seek to add extra definition through these processes: the differences between the fabric wear injected in the manufacturing stage, and that which comes from real long-term use, remain painstakingly obvious and easy to articulate. Meanwhile, designers like Zacks are almost apologetic about their working methods, and in particular the fact that she admittedly “...use[s] the computer as a place to [...] combine hand-done elements and weave them together, but never really as a place to originate pictures. I’m addicted to my scanner...I think it’s the best invention on earth.”<sup>2</sup>

All this begs the question: what kind of art do we get when organic decay processes *qua* decay processes are allowed to speak for themselves? How do these raw materials look and sound when not being relegated to framing more synthetically ‘pure’ elements, or as a metaphor for a prevailing set of contemporary social conditions? A good example would be the art of Scott Konzelmann, whose recording alias ‘Chop Shop’ already suggests a *modus operandi* of salvaging disused scrap parts to be later welded together into some barely functioning but highly intriguing monstrosity. If nothing else, Chop Shop’s recorded magnum opus *Oxide* (23five, 2008), a full CD of strangely engrossing non-music reconstructed from moisture-damaged tapes, does its best to resurrect Baudrillard’s sadly-

missed time lapse; the underwater streams of noisy sound artifacts on the disc seem as disinterested in human observers as any subject of time-lapse photography, and are equalized in such a way as to seem like they are literally decomposing and disintegrating upon contact with the listening environment. Also active in the world of the plastic arts, which he has hybridized with sound by way of his unique Speaker Constructions, Konzelmann has aimed to create a “music of decay” in which said organic process constitutes the “performance” itself. The sounds played back through Konzelmann’s specially-housed loudspeakers are then recorded and released on a variety of home audio formats, extending the reach of the Speaker Constructions even further.

His first Speaker Construction, *Furnace Plate C1679*, consisted of an iron plate taken from a furnace, featuring an 8" circular indentation, which - once drilled through by the artist- provided a convenient means of mounting a similarly sized speaker through which steady sonic frequencies traveled. As the sound hurtles through the speakers at a constant high-volume rate, damage to the speaker cones and other materials is likely to occur, but this is a possibility welcomed by the artist: it makes the physicality of the sound more apparent, and allows the otherwise unyielding hums, hisses and clatters to become further modulated with no outside intervention. Although his original artistic intention is stated as “giving sound a body,” his art also fits into a strong tradition of work that remains open to unintended consequences- consequences that are further accelerated by choosing “bodies” that are not in their prime.

Konzelmann’s home audio releases have occasionally come housed in seemingly impenetrable lead and copper sleeves (see his *Smolder 3*” cd released on V2 Archief), or his *Steel Plate 10*” double-vinyl set on RRRRecords, whose particular packaging innovation you can probably deduce from the title. Rarely do album artworks manage to make the sound contained within them seem like a *mise en abyme* of that housing, but these specimens from Chop Shop come staggeringly close: the authoritative weight of the sleeves, their patterned discoloration from electro-chemical reactions, and the sound within provide incredibly complementary sensory effects. As to the subsequent emotional effects, critic Ken ‘Kenny G’ Goldsmith’s comes to a bold conclusion – of Smolder’s musical content he writes that

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“...there's something in its adamant refusal to engage on any emotional level that makes you respect it. For this reason alone, it's important. Although industrial, mechanical and noise music has been with us all century, there's generally some attempt to express something, despite its contradictory claims. Not this record. Smolder, in its hardcore modernist stance, achieves an expressive stasis that manages to deaden the emotional plane like the lead it's wrapped in.”<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, Konzelmann himself is free of ‘expressive stasis’ when communicating about his artwork (and I have to say that Goldsmith’s evaluation here was like a ‘throwing down of the gauntlet’ that partially inspired me to make personal contact with the man.) I fielded a number of questions to Scott throughout 2009-2010 and found him to have a natural enthusiasm for creation, coupled with a bare minimum of anxiety over ‘recognition’ and compensation. Since Scott was involved with another improvisational venture -the ‘cassette network’ of the 1980s- before he became involved with his Speaker Constructions and more elaborate multi-Construction installations, this seemed like a good place to begin...

*Your first cassette work ("Primitive Power / Positive Force") came out in 1987, by which time this whole practice of homemade cassette releasing had been happening for about a decade. Was it easy for you to immediately integrate yourself into the culture of home-tapers, or were there some challenges to acceptance of your work at the outset?*

Yes, I became active fairly late. I started listening and exchanging material with several people in 1984/85, so I had some idea of what was happening prior to my first release. "Primitive Power / Positive Force" was then my "official" introduction, sent out to people whose work I admired and felt some kinship with. I received very good response and support- but I also learned that it was important to somehow make the work really stand out; whether sonically, in the packaging, or conceptually, etc. That was the primary challenge I found for myself as a result of that cassette circulating.

*Having said that, how much did things change from your first release to the 2nd cassette ["Scraps"] in 1989?*

I spent time after the first release developing what came to be known as my Speaker Constructions to better convey and shape the sonic materials. These Speaker Constructions are sculptural assemblages of found and scavenged elements housing functional loudspeakers- each Speaker Construction is operated with a distinct sound program which reflects its' individual physical characteristics. Isolated, or in group settings, the Speaker Constructions charge the listening room to provide a unique listening experience. This area then became the major focus for my work, developing a distinct quality in both presentation and the recordings. So, with "Scraps" I was able to better direct the material. My contacts and distribution widened considerably after that release made its way around. Labels such as RRR and Banned Productions started to ask for further projects to appear through them, and festivals and galleries began offering to present installations and performances of my work.

*I'm curious what some of the initial audience reactions were to the Speaker Constructions- did any one particular aspect of the presentation (either the sculptural aspect, or the audio output) seem to take precedence over the others, as people encountered them?*

The primal seed of the Speaker Constructions: I found early on, when working in abstract sound, that people always looked at the loudspeaker as they listened - ear cocked - looking for information, some context, or reference. I thought of giving them something to really look at, something that further defined and actually gave a physical body/object to better convey what they were hearing. The focus of this work is to first capture, distill, and then present a particular sound experience as purely as possible. The presentation and focus of my work was more installation than performance--as my working process is to use and to record these objects in variable situations, on end---this made for a challenge---in particular, that the recorded releases convey the experience of an immersive, directed listening environment. Presenting images of the Speaker Constructions along with the sounds expanded the SCRAPS package and gave definition to the materials: intention and more

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information for the listener. "Physical sounds through visible sources" was the motto then, and remains so now.

*Were these objects built with some previous knowledge of what they would sound like upon completion, or were the sonic results a surprise even to you?*

Initially, yes: a surprise. A visual idea originally- but of course, I quickly found the playful aspect of "loose" or manipulated speaker elements in various housings (i.e. pipes/hoods/plates/etc.). The Speaker Constructions are developed in a dialog with the sound component--to modify or exploit the reproduction/role and functionality.

*Did you ever feel there was any tension between the two 'worlds' of public art installations / exhibits, and that of the international 'tape network' which your early releases contributed to? Or did their respective energies feed off of / complement each other?*

Very good question- and a point that remains sticky. I ended up in an odd crack between the two. The art world read "noise--what is *that?*", and what do we *do* with that??" Never got a cold shoulder from the cassette network- who, perhaps, were also not fully sure of the intent or focus behind it. Whittled down the people I stayed in contact/trade with onwards. Earlier, it was easier--- as both audiences / "worlds" were fairly open and curious. Originally, I was loath to call myself a "sound artist", but the gallery world then needed that terminology to somehow place it. At the same time I was equally loath to call myself a "noise artist"--as that did not describe the intent (or craft) of the focus behind the work. Both were pretentious. That was 1989. Now, in 2009 it's easier to bend either/or with the descriptions--as they both are more accepted as a more well-known vernacular, though I feel it remains vague. Chop Shop exists in an odd niche somewhat apart from much of the current contexts of both...I initially fed each side by the packaging of my releases--and further by primarily presenting my work as installation--or capture, rather than performances. I now do both, as the proper situation presents.

*Another question about both the speaker constructions, and the 'art object' tapes you were making: was the 'industrial salvage' aesthetic associated with these objects meant to impart any particular message or*

*commentary (be it ethical, political etc.)? Or was it just a matter of finding these 'scrap' materials visually attractive and evocative?*

None. No message, no commentary. Not to be taken as political, or ethical--at all. Trying to present sound as a physical residue (mark).

*Do you feel like -despite the apparent awkwardness of your work 'falling between the cracks'- that this resistance to classification (both from yourself and from the 'art community') will end up giving your work a greater longevity?*

The "crack" is not uncomfortable; I find it to be enough at this point. Could be wider if I chose to push it, but I strive to make my work as consistent as possible to my ear and sensibility- at my own pace. There has always been some stress (both internal and external) about remaining more current, as there is an expectation of a fairly constant stream of releases or shows as a barometer. I remain more known by previous history, and by audience support more than activity.

On that note, I must add this: I have met the most incredible people through my activity in the sound network. I count so many great friends- various and far-flung-that have become solid pals that I will know for the rest of my life. That goes back to just sending cassettes to people whose work I enjoyed and respected, and hearing back. So when you ask about longevity, there are internal (overlapping) circles that I am extremely grateful and pleased to have had their long-standing support of my work, to further push, foster--and spark. I continue to hear from great and interesting new people--the circle widens.

*In your opinion, why is it easier today than in 1989 to work around these identifiers like "noise artist"? Are people really that much better informed today, or more willing to discover new things without worrying where it fits into the categorical puzzle?*

In 1989, calling your work noise would not have found any wider audience that wasn't already listening. Calling your work 'sound art' then came off as pretentious to the audience that was already listening. The recent popularity of noise has allowed for very random shit to

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be considered sound art. There is now a much wider audience that hears in either terminology a "new" direction. After the onset of the digital format in the 1990's---with the lap toppers, DJ ambient noise--and further with the popularity of rock bands incorporating "noise"...that while the usage has become significantly more prevalent and accepted--much (if any) context remains vague. Academically, or commercially. Perhaps that is just fine. Some listeners sense and chase the thread, or history, and make their connections. It takes effort to decipher any clear categories from much of the work that came out of that period (mid 1980's to 2000+)---and hats off to those that try.



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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared*, trans. Chris Turner, p. 49. Seagull Books, London / New York / Calcutta, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Zacks quoted in "Designer Spotlight" (author uncredited.) *Layers* Vol. 5 No. 5 (September / October 2009), p. 16. Kelby Media Group, Oldsmar Florida.

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved July 2, 2010 at <http://www.wfmu.org/~kennyg/popular/reviews/chop.html>