

THE INDEPENDENT JOURNAL OF **CREATIVE IMPROVISED MUSIC**

artima



Volume 47 Number 2

April May June 2021

JAAP BLONK INTERVIEW "YHP" BY KEN WEISS

Jaap (pronounced "Yahp") Blonk (b. June 23, 1953, Woerden, Holland) is an immensely original sound poet/extreme vocalist/composer. Mostly self-taught, he's built an enormous arsenal of sounds, ranging from whispers to the grotesque, and has even developed a number of his own languages. Blonk first gained international attention for his vocally gymnastic interpretation of Kurt Schwitters' "Ursonate," a work that continues to draw his interest. Although much of his work is done as a solo performer, Blonk has collaborated with avant-garde Jazz artists such as John Tchicai, Ken Vandermark, Tristan Honsinger, Mats Gustafsson, Cor Fuhler, Fred Lonberg-Holm and Michael Zerang, as well as other extreme vocalists Phil Minton, David Moss and Maja Solveig Kjelstrup Ratkje. In addition to leading his own ensemble, "Jaap Blonk's Retirement Overdue", he is also a visual artist. This interview took place by way of Email between January - February 2021.

Cadence: How have you been spending your time during the current global coronavirus pandemic?

Jaap Blonk: As far as creative activity goes; I've spent the most time on my visual art. This has become increasingly important and satisfying for me over the years. The first appreciation I got for this was back in 1993 when the director of the sound poetry festival Hej Tatta Gorem [a quote from Hugo Ball's 1916 sound poem "Karawane"] noticed the scores for my phonetic etudes in my first solo CD Flux de Bouche that had just come out. The festival, in Stockholm, asked me to make larger format drawings of these and they were shown in a small exhibition during the festival. The following year I had a two-week residency in a small gallery in the Netherlands where I made quite a lot more drawings. At first they were still sort of functional scores for vocal pieces, where I used the signs of the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) with a lot of my own invented signs added to represent sounds I liked to make but were not represented in the IPA. But gradually the work 'emancipated' itself towards purely visual art. In 2006 I took a year off of performing, a sabbatical, and learned programming languages. Then I started to also use the computer to design and process images. I have taken part in several exhibitions and published 6 limited edition books so far of the visual work, some combined with a CD. Currently I am mainly working on two series. The first is "Conjectures," which are structures in black and white, designed on the computer, which I then print and add color and other elements to by hand. The second series works the other way around; it is entitled "Garbage Collection." These are collages of trash material and cheap stuff, which I scan and then process digitally afterward. I devise my own algorithms for the design and processing, I don't use commercial software such as Photoshop and the

Interview:

Jaap Blonk



like. On the music front, I keep composing new work. The pieces for instruments, for my band Jaap Blonk's Retirement Overdue (founded in 2018, the year I turned 65), have to be temporarily shelved because we can't play concerts. Other work, done on the computer, with my voice added at times, was issued as a digital album at the end of 2020. Some titles: Inside Outcry, Lockdown Itch, Prime Obsession I. There are new texts as well, partly computer-generated, and some videos, to be found on Vimeo. I have been busy to keep my record label Kontrans alive (started in 1993 as part of the non-profit foundation of the same name). One of the first distributors of the label was actually Cadence.. So far there have been 30 releases. Three of these were issued last year, after COVID-19 started: The double CD New Start by the aforementioned Retirement Overdue (with the Amsterdam-based Miguel Petruccelli, Frank Rosaly and Jasper Stadhouders). My version of Antonin Artaud's To Have Done with The Judgment of God, in English translation, for voice and electronics. And most recently, a trio set with Lou Mallozzi, Ken Vandermark and myself, recorded in Chicago in November of 2019. A good thing for the label was being accepted, last summer, as a member of the Catalytic Sound collective. This gives better opportunities for sales in the U.S. and also I could do two streaming concerts in their festival in July - one solo and one with Mats Gustafsson and Fred Lonberg-Holm. I had a great 3-week tour of the United States scheduled from late March through mid-April of 2020, with 20 performances, which I had worked on to organize for 6 months. Canceling everything took one day only, after Trump announced the travel ban for EU citizens on March 12. A few venues, in Boston, Washington, DC and Chicago, set up streaming concerts for me that yielded a little money from donations. In 1996 I moved from Amsterdam to Arnhem, in the east of the Netherlands. I am able to afford a small studio here, which nowadays in Amsterdam would be too expensive. Also, the surroundings of Arnhem are very attractive for biking and walking, with several National Parks bordering on the town.

Cadence: *What's been your connection with the United States?*

Blonk: Since 1994 I have gradually been building up a network and fan base in the States. A large part of my sales of recordings goes there. Generally, I have found more appreciation as an improviser there than in Europe.

Cadence: *Wikipedia describes you as an "Dutch avant-garde composer and performance artist." Composer is the term you've chosen to describe yourself in the past but are you comfortable with being referred to as a performance artist?*

Blonk: Well, to some degree I would consider myself a performance artist (in the sense of 'performance art' as a recognized part of visual art), but only in the very last place. That is to say: after composer, musician/improviser, poet and visual artist. Music composition was the first creative activity I took somewhat seriously (during the process

Interview:

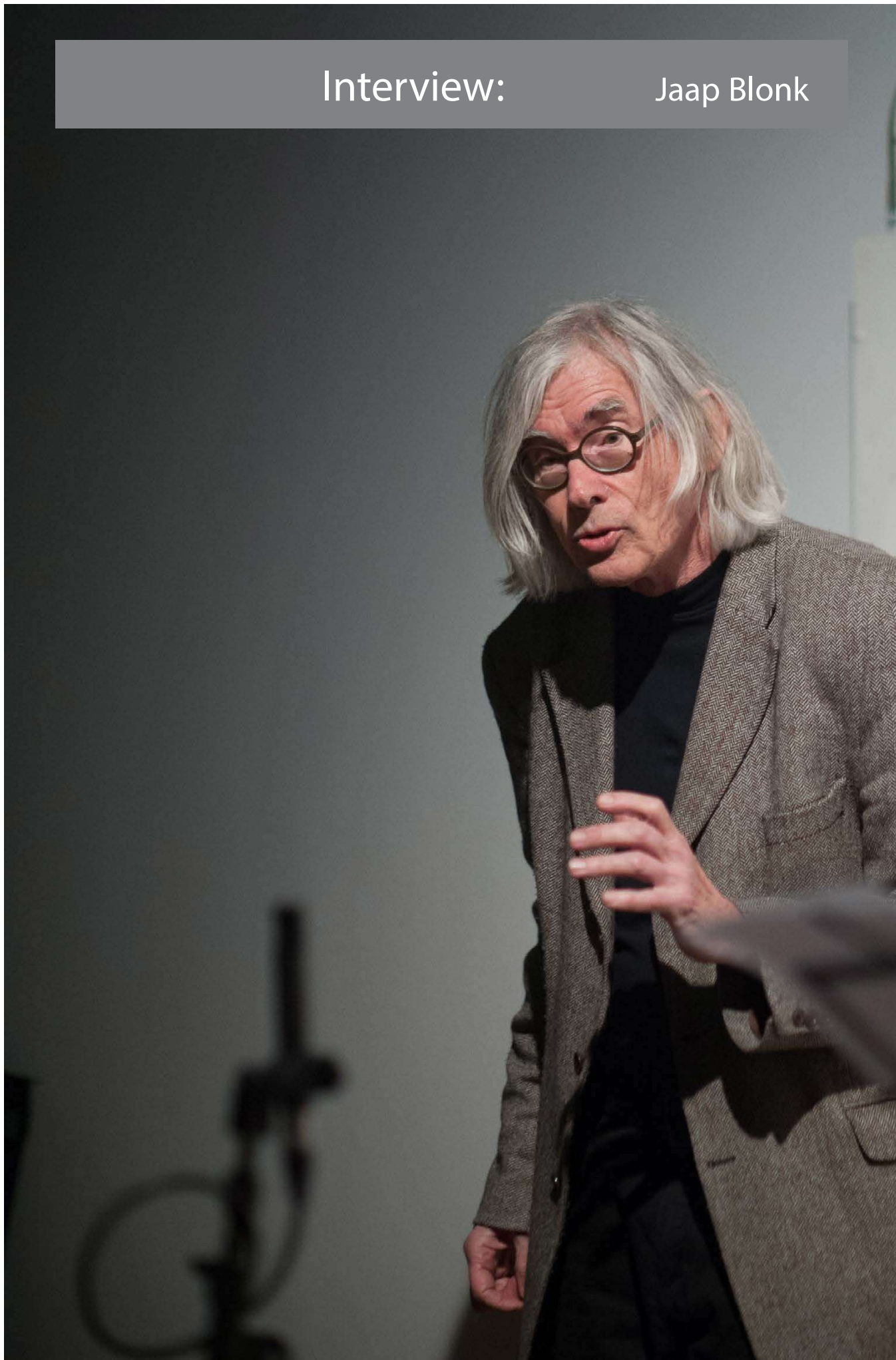
Jaap Blonk



of giving up my mathematics studies), from 1976 on, at first very simple tunes. I had started playing saxophone a few years earlier, but so far, I considered that just a hobby. I was raised in a fundamentalist Reformed Church family and as soon as I went to university and had my own room in Utrecht, I went to the local music school to learn the instrument that was the very least associated with the church I grew up in - the saxophone. Only when I got addicted to Free Jazz in the late '70s, I got into really practicing saxophone for hours, also trying to concoct every possible sound out of the instrument. However, it never quite came out as I imagined. Meanwhile I had developed an interest in poetry and wrote some (I admit, juvenile romantic poems mostly). Then I discovered Dada sound poetry and started reciting those, at first in private, and later on in small public performances. In 1984 there came a breakthrough: while listening to Archie Shepp's album *Three For A Quarter, One For A Dime* (with Roswell Rudd) in my Amsterdam attic room, I spontaneously jumped into a vocal improvisation along with the record, only to notice I was still doing that when the record had long ended and was spinning in its inner groove. I realized this was much more natural and direct for me than trying to make all those weird sounds on the saxophone. So, the voice became my main instrument as an improviser too. Only much later on I added improvisation and composition with electronics, which are now a vital part of my practice. For a time, I still continued playing saxophone in the arrangements of my compositions for my bands, but in 1995 I gave up the instrument completely. As a poet (the third category I mentioned above) I wrote a lot of sound poetry, both using the regular alphabet and my personal phonetic notations. A comprehensive collection of the work associated with the Dutch language (playing with the language, but also invented languages, sounding like Dutch but with no meaning) came out in 2013 at the Flemish publishing house Het Balanseer. As I already mentioned, the phonetic notations developed into independent visual work, so I am a visual artist now as well, creating videos and interactive animations too. Coming back to 'performance art,' I have been invited to festivals of this specific art form and found most of the work quite boring (after 10 seconds you see what is going to happen and then it goes on for half an hour...). When I have a rare appearance in this kind of context, along with extended voice techniques, I use the space and every prop I can find there, in a completely improvised performance, always different: "Joys of a Useless Life" (<http://jaapblonk.com/Pages/joys.html>). It's true that, as an improvising vocalist, there's more of a performance aspect to my action on stage than with most singers. I won't hesitate to go into the audience space when I think it's needed, or for instance mingle with performing dancers if there are any participating. Here I have found an inspiring counterpart in drummer Weasel Walter, in the exciting new quartet JeJaWeDa (<http://jaapblonk.com/Pages/bbsw.html>), with also Jeb Bishop on trombone and Damon Smith on bass. Especially in the great little Midwest tour we did in November

Interview:

Jaap Blonk



2019, things way out on the beaten track in improvised music occurred. Sadly, our plans for a European tour in the fall of 2020 were thwarted by the corona crisis.

Cadence: Sound poetry is more popular in Europe than in America.

Would you define the term for those not familiar with it?

Blonk: First of all, with "America," you mean the United States? My frequent visits to Latin America have taught me that people there are not amused by this practice ("We're America too! Please say Estados Unidos when you mean the U.S.!"). In Canada it's different, "America" is normally used for the U.S., sometimes even in a derogatory way ("Hey, this is not America!"). I'm also saying this because both in Canada and Latin America there is much more of a tradition of sound poetry than in the States. A very rough definition: in sound poetry the sound is more important than the meaning. 'Meaning' here being the semantic meaning: meaning as in regular language. You should also say sound poetry is poetry where the meaning is conveyed more by the sound than by the words. 'Meaning' is then widened to include also musical meaning, emotional meaning, the direct meaning of sounds. In the United States there is another term for this kind of work: "Text-Sound Texts," which is also the title of a seminal anthology by Richard Kostelanetz from 1980. Many U.S. authors are represented there, a lot of them associated with the Fluxus movement. Some say that sound poetry is older than poetry. Many old religions have ritual formulae with no semantic meaning, and there are theories conjecturing that poetry originated from these. Sound poetry was first presented as an original art form in the 1910s, by both the Russian Futurist and the Dada movements. It has always been a small niche, not only in the U.S. but everywhere. Over my 40-year practice I have seen it become even much more marginalized.

Cadence: How does performing in America differ for you as compared to working in Europe where hearing an array of languages occurs daily?

Blonk: In the bigger European countries (Germany, France, Italy and so on) everything (TV, movies) is still dubbed in the native language. So, people don't usually hear an array of languages. Only in smaller countries like the Netherlands subtitles are the common thing. I think the main reason why performing in the United States is so gratifying for me, is that there is so much less going on outside the mainstream culture than in Europe (except in the big cities like New York, Chicago, LA). So, it doesn't have to do with language. People are eager to experience something special and experimental that would come their way only very rarely. I have had occasions where people made 4-6 hour drives to come to one of my performances. In Europe that would be unheard of. Also, smaller venues in the U.S. have so much more flexibility. They can plan performances at much shorter notice to suit a touring musician's schedule. In Europe they all depend on government funding and often have to fix their program a year ahead, with glossy

Interview:

Jaap Blonk



printed brochures. So, while artist fees are generally higher and travel distances are shorter, it's actually much more difficult to organize a tour.

Cadence: *How did you come to sound poetry?*

Blonk: Around 1976-77 I was slowly losing faith in a career in mathematics. My motivation for math was high. I would typically keep working on a problem through the wee hours of the morning. But I was more and more drawn to poetry and Jazz, and the math professors in the department seemed duller every day...I didn't want that kind of future! I started looking around and participated in workshops in various artistic fields. One of those was about reciting poetry, and the instructor offered widely varied material to work with, from very traditional and straight poems to experimental stuff, and even sound poems, namely the "Six Sound Poems, 1916" by Hugo Ball, that he wrote for a Dada soirée at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, Switzerland. Tressli bessli nebogen leila, zitti kitillabi, zack hitti zopp! This was a tremendous eye and ear opener for me. A no man's land between literature and music, with so many untrodden paths and things to discover, without having to bother about the rules of music or the meaning of language. I memorized one of these poems ("Seahorses and Flying Fish") and recited it in the public presentation at the end of the workshop. I still love this little poem and often open a performance or lecture with it, always adding an improvisation on the 'words' of the poem.

Cadence: *You heard a reading of Kurt Schwitters' "Ursonate" (translates to 'Primordial Sonata') which is made up of non-language vocals and it changed you. Did you know at that time that that art form was to be your career path?*

Blonk: I heard the "Ursonate" read by a student of the drama school in Arnhem in 1979 (later I learned that a teacher at that school used parts of the work as articulation exercises). I was very taken by it, but I remember thinking immediately that you could do more with it if you managed to memorize it. But a career? No. After I had made photocopies of the text, I played around with it just for fun and practiced sections of it. Over the course of two years, I learned more and more parts of it. I had told friends about it, and at some point a friend asked me to present it at his birthday party. So, I put some more effort into it and committed the complete piece to memory. It turned out that people liked it at that occasion, and I started getting invitations to perform it at small venues like bars and Rock clubs. At the same time though, I had my first Jazz band (Splinks), playing my compositions. I didn't do vocals there, I only played saxophones in the band. For me that was more important as a career perspective than the sound poetry.

Cadence: *It's telling that you had a strict Calvinistic upbringing but hated singing organized music in church and in social settings. Was that too confining for you? Were your parents understanding?*

Blonk: The congregational singing in church was limited to the so-called 'non-rhythmic psalms,' where each syllable gets the same, rather

TWO ABSTRUSE QUESTIONS

1

A musical score in A major (A#) and 4/4 time, featuring the lyrics "aat z'ooft at ooe eteek". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and guitar chord diagrams. A complex network of lines connects different parts of the score to a central point.

Key elements include:

- A red box containing the text "A, het er echt".
- A red box at the bottom containing the text "hidde, ate?".
- Hand-drawn sketches of human figures, some with question marks, and a yellow vertical bar.
- Several circular diagrams with red and blue segments, some containing musical notes.
- Multiple guitar chord diagrams throughout the score.

TWO ABSTRUSE QUESTIONS

2

The page contains a musical score with several lines of notation. The notation includes notes, rests, and various symbols such as squares, circles, and triangles. There are several handwritten annotations:

- Two orange ovals at the top containing the letters "S.T." and "L.T." respectively.
- A large purple 'X' is drawn across the page, crossing out the central musical notation.
- A large purple oval is drawn around a section of the notation in the middle.
- A large orange oval is drawn around a section of the notation at the bottom right.
- Text boxes containing Dutch text are interspersed with the notation:
 - dat hog rechtetel of iet doet
 - aar o... it vat hebben a... er orget hiet
 - eer o... it? is aardoor is dit gevee, vat / it egteet?
- A small orange box with the word "Mar" is also present.
- Various other symbols like grids, diamonds, and arrows are scattered throughout the score.

long, duration. Any kind of rhythm is considered too frivolous. One line took so long that you had to get a new breath several times within it. And then often after church, we went to visit my grandparents and there was more singing of psalms, with my father at the harmonium. I got to hate this thoroughly and began to refuse to sing along from when I was 9 or 10 years old. Of course, my parents had no understanding for this. Also, later on they were very unhappy with the course my life took. Mine was not considered a decent profession. They never came to any performance of mine.

Cadence: That's a painful situation your parents put you in as a young man finding his path, a path that obviously required great strength for you to stay on. How deep of an impact did their reaction have on you and did you eventually resolve things with your family? Did that help drive you creatively?

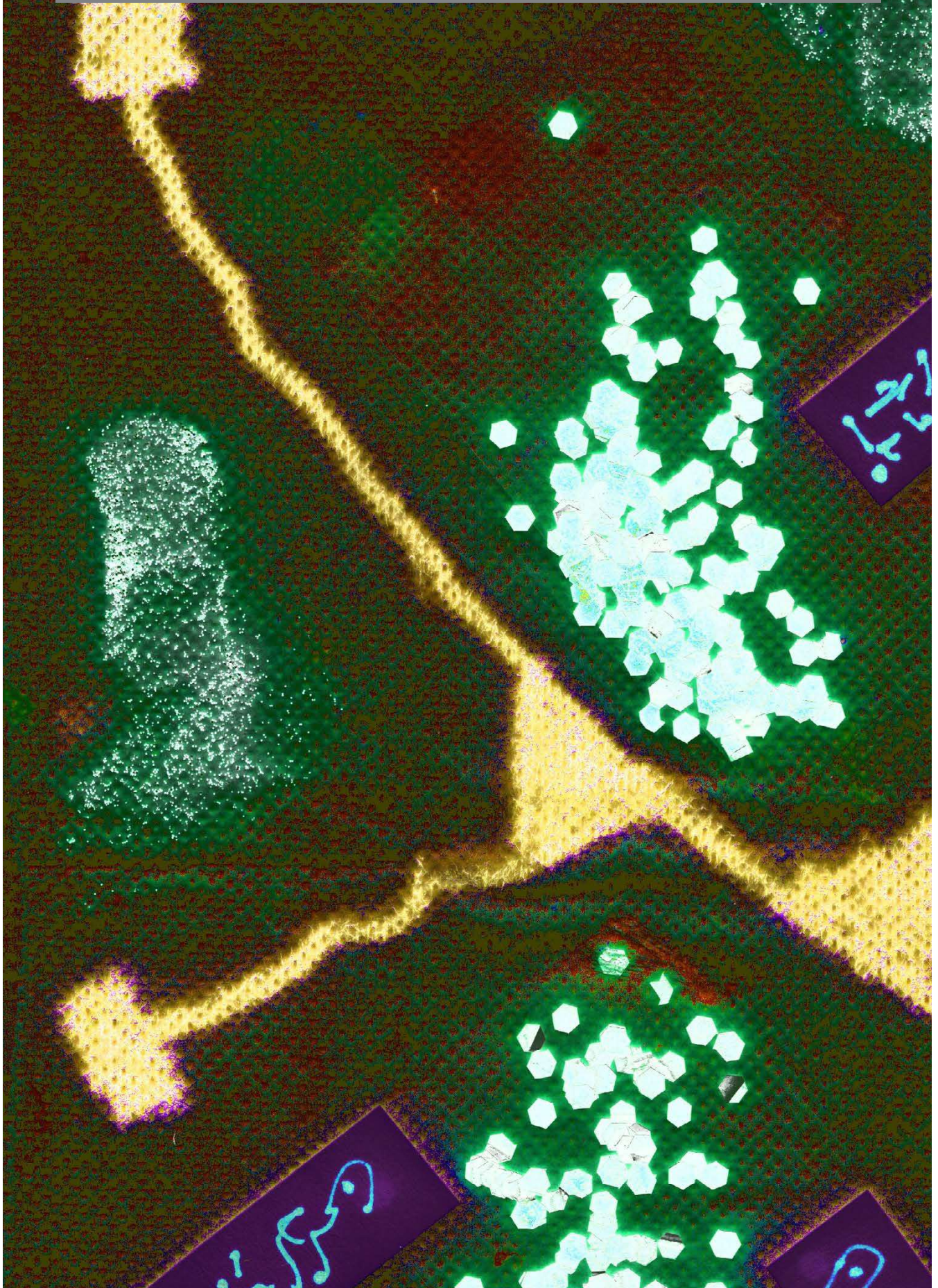
Blonk: I wasn't going to go into this in detail, not wanting to throw dirt on my deceased parents. Also, I have no way of knowing how I would have developed if I had been raised in a more liberal environment. Still, I think it's likely that my upbringing made me more of a rebel. From my early teens on, I started listening to 1960s pop music in my bedroom on a small transistor radio I had bought from my pocket money. I had the radio play softly and pressing it to my ear so they wouldn't hear anything downstairs. A little later on I started getting books from the library that were strictly forbidden in our church. My anarchist behavior in the organized systems I had to function in later, in my twenties, can probably be seen as an extrapolation of this. And I think it did definitely drive me creatively, having gotten used to finding out everything by myself from early on. The relationship with my parents was sort of resolved, but it always stayed superficial. On visits we didn't talk about religion anymore because they had given up trying to bring me back on the righteous path and I consistently avoided the subject. The closest my father got to appreciating my work was in a remark he made to one of my brothers. He said, "It may be art what Jaap does, but he shouldn't do it on Sundays." At the funeral of my mother, a neighbor woman told me that she and my mother listened to the radio together a few times when I was on there, out of sheer curiosity.

Cadence: Would you talk about your joy of making sounds? Why is that important to you?

Blonk: Through the exposure to sound poetry on the one hand, and Free Jazz on the other, I found out how liberating it can be to make sounds, regardless of what people find pleasant or in good taste. I experience many sounds as interesting and invigorating that most people would find ugly. I can even enjoy the sound of the dentist's drill or the repetitive metallic sounds when undergoing an MRI scan. I have no explanation for it, it's very intuitive. It's the thing that propelled me into devoting so much time to practice and research. Without that continuing joy I would no doubt have given up at some point, in the face of so many negative or indifferent reactions of people and

Interview:

Jaap Blonk



institutions in the earlier stages.

Cadence: How often are you still discovering new sounds, new ways to utilize your body creatively?

Blonk: Less often nowadays, and not very regularly. Sometimes writing new pieces, in notation, poses challenges that result in new sounds and gestural uses. A prime example is the 9-piece cycle "Vibrant Islands," that I made notes for on a long flight, from Atlanta to San Francisco, in 2015. Back at home I worked out the scores which contain a lot of idiosyncratic symbols inciting not only sounds, but also body movements and gestures. They feed and direct the performance while leaving a large amount of freedom to improvise.

Cadence: How do you deal with the sounds of everyday life? Are you especially tuned into listening to your environment? Does that serve as inspiration for you?

Blonk: Yes, environment sounds have often inspired me. Animal sounds, baby sounds, traffic sounds...a concrete example of the latter happened when I lived near where the Amsterdam tram line number 3 came down a bridge by a narrow bend about every 10 minutes, making a high squeaking sound. I got into the habit of imitating that, which gradually developed into a whole range of sounds made by inhaling air.

Cadence: Have you moved closer or farther away from a Jazz connection as your career has progressed?

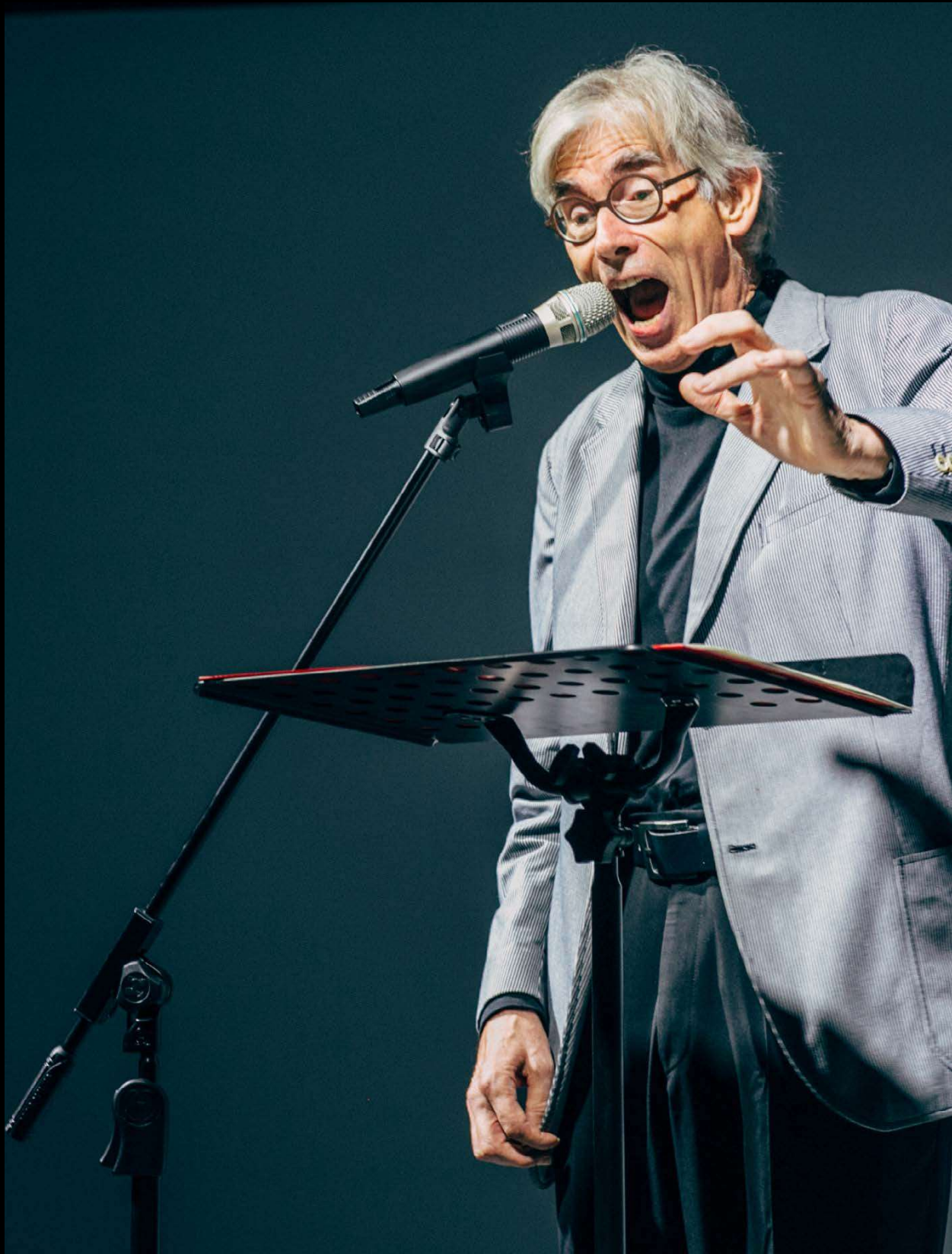
Blonk: It depends on what you consider Jazz. Many people have a conservative view, such as it has to have a regular beat as well as harmonies. But in a more open opinion, Jazz has developed to include many more forms of improvisation. I consider my improvisations on sound poems to be Jazz. There's a strong analogy between soloing on chord changes and soloing on phonetic material. In both cases, the basis is constant, but the solo can do anywhere. But what I think doesn't seem to matter in the outside world. By the powers-that-be, I am not considered a Jazz musician, but a sound poet. More so nowadays, although at one time, a good 20 years ago, I came close to winning the main Dutch jazz prize. With my new band Jaap Blonk's Retirement Overdue I may make a new entry into the Jazz world. In any case, quite a few of the pieces we play are definitely Jazz.

Cadence: Your work has always been a balance between spontaneous and structured segments. Why are both necessary for you? Have you ever attempted a completely spontaneous performance?

Blonk: This is a misunderstanding. Completely spontaneous performance has always been a mainstay for me. On my own Kontrans label, the whole Improvisors series (8 releases between 1996 and 2020), as well as the Electronic Improvisations series (5 titles between 2001 and 2017, so far) consist of free improvisation. I have done quite a few completely spontaneous solo performances, and many, many more with duos (with Maja Ratkje, with Terrie Ex) and trios (with Mats Gustafsson and Michael Zerang, with Claus van Bebber and

Interview:

Jaap Blonk



Carl Hübsch, with Jan Nijdam and Bart van der Putten over several years, and other shorter-lived groups). In the Retirement Overdue band free improv has an important part as well. Also, on tour I have done spontaneous improvisations with local musicians wherever people asked me to. On the other hand, composition has always been important to me of course, and composed parts can make things happen that wouldn't be possible by just improvising.

Cadence: *How do you judge a failed performance and how often, if at all, does that happen for you?*

Blonk: It's always gradual. Some are better and some less good. I can't recall ever having considered a performance completely failed, not 100% successful.

Cadence: *Why do you perform other sound poets' work?*

Blonk: Sound poetry comes alive only when you hear it. So, when the poets are dead, and have left none or only sparse recordings of themselves, it makes a lot of sense to me to perform their texts and keep them alive. In many cases, I consider my versions of those as my compositions using their texts, just as composers for many centuries have set texts of others to music.

Cadence: *Extreme facial expressions and humor play into your performances. One writer described your striking stage presence as "childlike freedom of improvisation." How and why did you develop that?*

Blonk: Ha-ha, it was me who coined this expression in an early bio I wrote about myself. It's actually still on my website ("As a vocalist, Jaap Blonk is unique for his powerful stage presence and almost childlike freedom in improvisation, combined with a keen grasp of structure"). This writer must have quoted from that. I wrote it just because that's how I've always felt when improvising. I didn't develop it; it came to me naturally. The extreme facial expressions are none other than those needed to make the sounds. Of course, in our increasingly square society, that will make people laugh. And laughing is healthy, I think. So, I am not going to cut out the elements that make people laugh. On the other hand, I never devise specific strategies to make people laugh, like stand-up comedians do. That's a whole different field and alien to me.

Cadence: *What role does the use of the grotesque play in your art? Why does the audience need this?*

Blonk: For myself, a lot of the ideas I get are nothing out of the ordinary, while still considered grotesque by many people. I can't help it. I don't use the grotesque intentionally. For the audience, getting exposed to art outside their normal scope is a healthy thing, I think. Quite a few people have told me that getting in touch with my work has been a life-changing experience for them.

Cadence: *How does the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) benefit your compositions?*

Interview:

Jaap Blonk



Blonk: In several ways, the study and use of the IPA has brought me great benefits. First of all, it got me into researching the finer details and the extended possibilities of every single phoneme. Also, it led me to a completely different type of research: not focusing on sounds primarily, but on the 'mechanics' of the mouth: position and movement of the tongue and lips, tension of the throat, air pressure outward or inward, use of the hands on the face. Experimenting with all these and then often being surprised by sounds coming out that I wasn't consciously searching for. This led to the wide range of sounds documented in the *Phonetic Etudes: Rhotic, Frictional and Labior*, on my first solo voice CDs. Furthermore, the use of the IPA allowed me to make better notations of my vocal parts in my own compositions and read the vocal parts in some pieces by others that I performed, such as the composition "Hubschrauber" by Carola Bauckholt, for solo voice and orchestra, that I performed a number of times. I also got into writing more challenging sound poems for myself, with the so much richer and more detailed notation possibilities of the IPA, compared to our normal 26-letter alphabet. I am still working on a strategy to compose algorithmically with the IPA symbols, as I do regularly with music, sound and visuals. This is a tough nut to crack, as there are no immediately logical ways to represent phonemes by numbers, as there are with music and sound (pitch, duration, loudness, overtones) or visuals (color, saturation, brightness, size, place).

Cadence: You've created your own languages. There's Onderlands, a parallel language to Dutch that sounds like Dutch but has no meaning, as well as BLIPAX (Blonk's IPA extended), which uses sounds not represented in the IPA. Talk about your languages and why there was a need to develop them.

Blonk: I started writing poems in Onderlands (Underlands as a synonym for Netherlands) around 2000. It happened spontaneously and it was fun, I didn't have a specific purpose in mind. But as it happened, they served well for the last phase of my trio BRAAXTAAL (documented on the CD *Dworr Buun* of 2001) when we created pieces with a looser structure, relying more on improvisation. Each of the Onderlands poems has a different image or atmosphere (a scene among rich people, a love song, looking at the sky in awe, a drinking song, etc.) which was reflected in the pieces with the trio. A little later some new Onderlands texts were used on the double CD *Off Shore* (2003) with a different trio. A larger selection was included in *Klinkt* (2013). I am not using any system to write these, they are intuitive. However, in some cases I used mathematical systems to create variations on them. In analogy to Onderlands I wrote some work in Ingletwist (example *Round About Ingletwist*), a parallel language to English. This is more tricky for me, not being a native English speaker. I had to check regularly with a dictionary, if I wasn't creating words that already exist without me knowing. BLIPAX uses the regular IPA with a lot of my

Interview:

Jaap Blonk



own signs added. I needed this in order to go beyond the very limited possibilities that existing languages and their alphabets offer. It is a purely functional notation system that serves to notate vocal sounds in as much detail as possible. However, it still stays very far from capturing the richness of voice completely and I am happy about that.

Cadence: Why not use some of the language spoken by the audience during your performance?

Blonk: I assume you mean the native language of the audience? Or actually spoken by them during my performance? For the first case: I do, as much as possible. Where I have sufficient mastery of the language, I offer explanations of my pieces in their language. I manage in English, German, French and Spanish. In addition, the few pieces in my work that are translatable at all have been translated into several languages that I do not speak, such as Czech, Finnish, Estonian). These are "Let's Go Out" (<http://jaapblonk.com/Texts/letsgoout.html>) and "Sound" (<http://jaapblonk.com/Texts/sound.html>). Then there's the minister or president piece (part 1: <https://jaapblonk.bandcamp.com/track/what-the-president-will-say-and-do-part-i> and part 2: <https://jaapblonk.bandcamp.com/track/what-the-president-will-say-and-do-part-2>), that I performed myself in more than 20 different languages, instructed by local people about the correct pronunciation. These included for instance Hungarian, Bahasa Indonesia, Amharic of Ethiopia.

Cadence: You've studied mathematics, which you've used to construct certain compositions. What is the benefit of using those disciplines and how use them yet maintain a human element that resonates with the listener?

Blonk: The use of mathematics to construct and generate material has incredibly enriched my work, especially since I started learning programming languages in 2006. Simple principles and number sequences let me concoct structures that I couldn't have dreamt of. In music, for instance several harmonic systems that nobody else in the world uses to my knowledge. In music, sound processing and visual work, the power to fully control the amount of randomness between 0 % and 100 %. I can generate work by unpredictable processes, making mistakes in coding and happening on serendipitous beauty. I don't think this is the place to go into technicalities of the programming. About the human element, I have always been confident that, however strictly structured a piece is, I can always breathe life into it with my voice. The same goes for my group compositions, by the musicians I choose. In the visual work, I add handmade elements to the mathematical structures after printing them.

Cadence: How much do politics enter into your work?

Blonk: I think a lot of my work is intrinsically anarchist. In earlier days I had periods of being part of some organized system, and it always led to actions of my part in a Dada vein: office jobs, music school,

university. In 1980 I worked for a while for a big insurance company, in a building housing 2,500 employees. I ended up organizing a big spectacle there on the day I was fired, a protest against the grey office discipline which got a lot of attention on Dutch national TV and radio. But the way my work touches politics is always general, not commenting on a specific time-and-place-limited situation. For instance, the minister/president piece I mentioned above applies to virtually every government in the world. By staying away from concrete situations, the work remains absolute art and doesn't become propaganda.

Cadence: *Do all your pieces have specific meaning?*

Blonk: Sure, but the specific meaning is up to the spectator/listener. The same work can have quite a different meaning for different people. The fact that I mostly don't use words helps of course. Although I'm often willing to offer explanations, the ultimate meaning is to be conveyed by the work itself. There is no hidden meaning that I could convey by words.

Cadence: *You've spoken in the past about performances that were met with audience outrage. What were some of the most extreme examples of this and how do you deal emotionally on a personal level when confronted by angry listeners?*

Blonk: In the early 1980s I got some pretty extreme reactions when I opened for Punk Rock bands, notably for The Stranglers. I got beer thrown at me, but it gave me extra energy. Later someone told me, "In the punk aesthetics, throwing beer at someone is a sign of love." I wasn't so sure of that, but I never stopped a performance. Only once I had to stop performing, but that was when I was physically attacked by a guy who had just been released from prison and had chosen that place to celebrate it with his gang members. They also damaged our van. The police came and the venue was closed for the night. More friendly was the occasion where school kids threw their lunch sandwiches at me when I was performing in a cage (that had temporarily no animals in it) at the Amsterdam zoo. Another memory: once I performed at a big Rock venue but there were only 6 people in the audience, and 5 of them left during the performance. So, I was pretty worried, but afterwards I met all of them at the bar, and heard they didn't find the performance bad at all, they were just scared... In general, adverse feedback during a performance tends to give me an extra impetus, just like very positive reactions. Indifference would be the worst, but fortunately that hardly ever occurs.

Cadence: *You've been using electronics in your art since 2000. What are you currently working with to advance your craft?*

Blonk: I spent many years creating work, both composed and improvised, with the laptop - since 1998. In the field of improvisation, I think I gained a level of flexibility with it that made it a worthy partner for my voice. Now I have just embarked on a similar voyage

Interview:

Jaap Blonk



with some modular synthesis hardware. I love the hands-on and often unpredictable character of it, but I still have a way to go to really improvise with it. For composition, I am combining it with structures created in the computer, and that looks very promising. There's a liveliness, quirkiness and warmth there that's not easily attainable with just a computer or digital equipment, I think.

Cadence: How was it to collaborate with virtuosic Jazz artists such as John Tchicai, Tristan Honsinger and Mats Gustafsson?

Blonk: The collaboration with Tchicai was just one concert, in February of 1997, when I had a one-month residency at UC Davis, where John was teaching. Local musicians Mat Marucci and Noah Hostock were also involved. We rehearsed once or twice as a quartet, I wrote lyrics to some of Tchicai's tunes and we did some of mine. It was a lot of fun and at times hilarious. I remember watching a video of it later with John and his then-time Dutch wife Margriet, and we laughed a lot. The video seems to have disappeared without a trace, unfortunately. With Tristan Honsinger, I was in a few projects, notably a small opera entitled *Rose Garden* in 1993 at the BIMHuis in Amsterdam. It was written by tenor saxophonist J.C. Tans and also featured singer Peggy Larson and ICP members Ab Baars and Ernst Glerum. Tristan is a superb and unique musician. I never got to know what he really thought of my work. With Mats, I mainly worked in a trio that also featured percussionist Michael Zerang from Chicago, from 1996 till 1999. We recorded one of the first releases of my Kontrans label. The music was quirky and very energetic. After doing a great 13-concert U.S. tour in 1999, we've always been hoping we could play together again, but so far it never happened. In general, working with virtuosic instrumentalists has helped me a lot in developing my vocal improviser's vocabulary, more so than working with other vocalists. I should also mention tuba player Carl Ludwig Hübsch, trombonist Jeb Bishop and bassist Damon Smith there.

Cadence: How does your approach change when performing alongside another vocalist such as Maja Solveig Kjelstrup Ratkje?

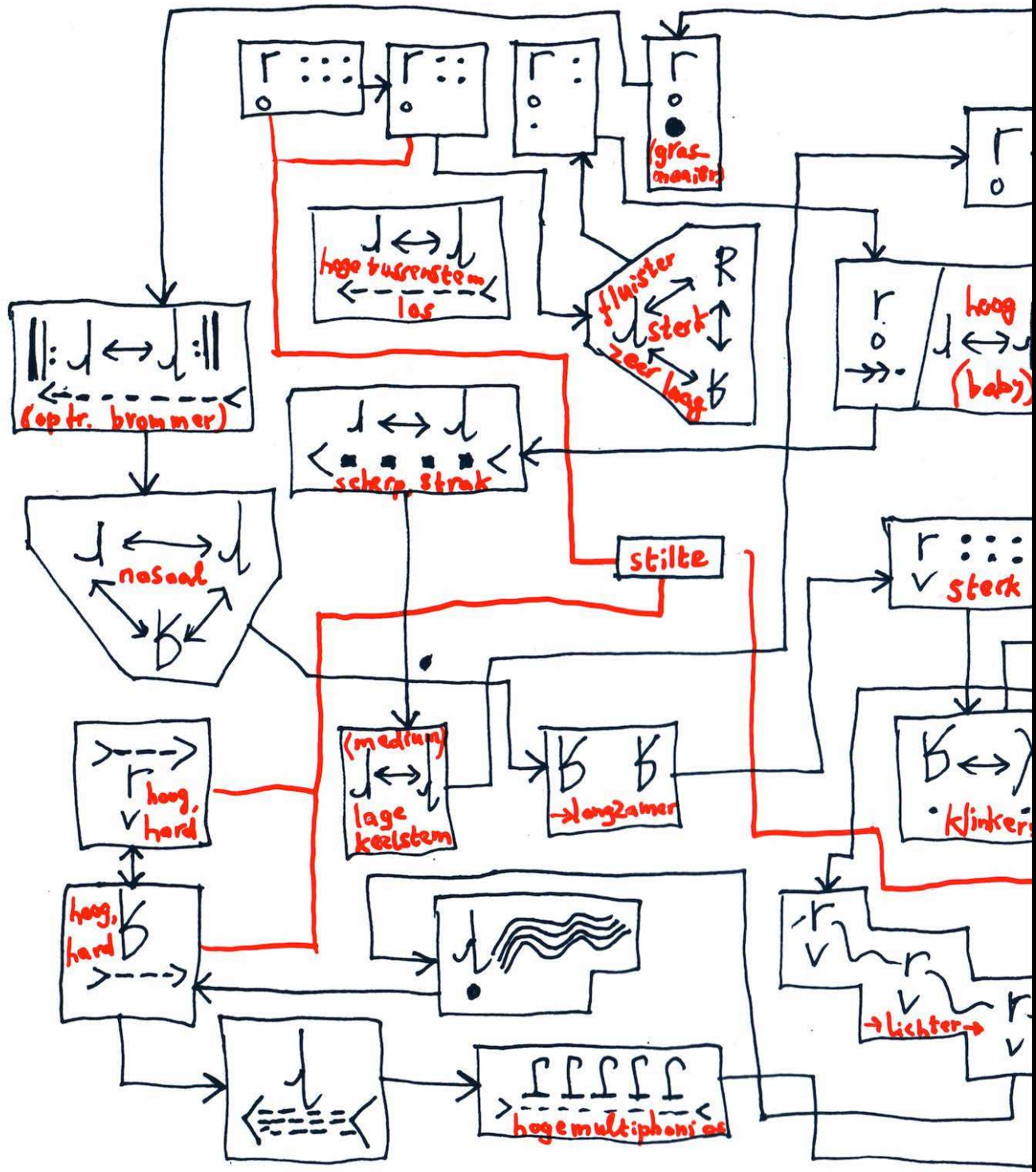
Blonk: There are several things I'm aware of when performing with a female vocalist, such as Maja and also Ute Wassermann: the natural difference of register and being more 'polite.' Although, especially with Maja, there was no need to. She has no fear to dive into sounds that many female singers stay away from because they might be not so elegant. In working with other vocalists, I prefer those who do not fall too much for the temptation to go into theatrical antics - which is not so easy sometimes because audiences tend to love that.

Cadence: Cor Fuhler wrote a piece for you to sing in Klingon, the fictional language from the Star Trek franchise. How was singing in Klingon?

Blonk: Cor gave me just the text, he didn't give me a melody or any other instructions. I bought the Klingon dictionary to study the

Rhotic

(Fonetische Etude Nr. 1)



meaning and learn the right pronunciation. I didn't really have much affinity with it and never went back to it.

Cadence: *Would you talk about your two long standing ensembles - Splinks [Jazz-oriented orchestra founded as a quartet in 1983 and now is up to 13 members] and BRAAXTAAL? [trio noise-prog band with electronics]*

Blonk: Both ensembles ended long ago. Splinks existed from 1983 till 1999, with the double CD Consensus as an end point. The name came from the title of an early tune I wrote called "Blonk's Blinks." It was the band where I mostly developed my Jazz composition. What helped a lot was in the 1980s and 1990s the funding situation for Jazz and improvised music was much better than it is now. For instance, national radio would still regularly record and broadcast concerts. They'd send a van with equipment and a few sound technicians to the venue and pay the musicians a decent fee. That nowadays is unheard of. Back then, Splinks had quite a few tours of the Dutch venues and could really grow as a band. Always, the repertoire was really varied, with elements of straight Jazz, contemporary composed music, free improv and pieces based on text or sound poetry. Some critics have called it eclectic, but I disagree, it's all part of what I have to say. My current Retirement Overdue quartet is the natural successor of Splinks, and the music is just as varied. BRAAXTAAL (1987-2005) was quite different. The creative process was similar to that of a Rock band. There was hardly ever any written music. Band members (keyboard player Rob Daenen, drummer Theo Bodewes and I) brought ideas which in frequent rehearsals grew into set pieces. There were several phases. We started out with a repertoire based on poems by Lucebert (1924-94), considered by many the greatest Dutch 20th century poet. I love his work and already participated in performances of it as early as 1978. After that, I started bringing in my own texts. Until our first CD BRAAXTAAL, I still played some saxophone in the band as well. In 1995, a tour opening for The Ex rather changed our music. It got a lot louder and rougher, closer to a Rock esthetic though of course, still way out for most people. The second CD Speechlos reflects that phase. Over the last years, I started doing electronics as well. Theo played electronic drums only and Rob played a sampler, instead of the DX 7. We ended up as a free improv trio, though often playing grooves, with me contributing texts in Onderlands. The last CD was Dworr Buun.

Cadence: *As you mentioned earlier, you're also an acclaimed visual artist. You've had numerous exhibitions of large-scale drawings of your scores which include wavy lines, colors, circles and other designs. Your scores are wonderful works of art but how does one interpret them into a musical setting?*

Blonk: I am not really an acclaimed visual artist. I don't have a gallery representing me and have sold work only on a few occasions over the years. Most exhibitions were group shows and the few solo exhibits I had were in small obscure galleries. Still, I am happy, especially to

have my visual work published in a number of books (see titles and links at bottom). In the books that come with a CD, there's usually some relationship between the images and the CD tracks. Sometimes literal, as with the texts on kitchen ingredients in *Traces of Cookery* and the Artaud fragments in the book/CD devoted to his sound poetry fragments. Also, the texts in *Fehlberliner U-Wirr*, which are scrambled versions of the station names of the Berlin subway network, are interpreted literally on the CD. In other cases, there can be a relationship in terms of atmosphere or feeling. Most of the work I am making now is not meant to be interpreted as music or sound. It's independent visual art. One could of course transform it into sound in many ways, but that can be done with anything visual. I have done several improvised performances in museums and galleries, sounding the art (paintings and/or sculptures by various artists) that was exhibited there.

Cadence: One of your visual art works is the book 111 Recipes which is filled with numerous renderings of two mixed kitchen ingredients, one solid, one liquid, such as turmeric and buttermilk or beets and icing sugar placed on paper. How did you arrive at this concept?

Blonk: The first 11 images in this book were indeed made in that way. I guess I just liked the visual aspect of some spilled ingredients on kitchen surfaces, especially when I was too lazy to clean up for a time, so that different things got mixed. I decided to try mixing ingredients on paper, and some of these looked really nice, so I let them dry, scanned and printed them and made drawings on them. The other 100 images in *111 Recipes* are reproductions of my original drawings for the book *Traces of Cookery / Kochspuren*. This was printed in an edition of 100, each having an original drawing bound in the middle. Copies of this book are still for sale. The same goes for the Artaud book, only there each copy has a collage on black paper in the middle.

Cadence: What happens at the workshops you present around the world? How do you instruct others about the creative use of one's body?

Blonk: I always start a workshop with a warm-up of the body and voice, followed by some easy and fun games with sound, for people to loosen up. After that it depends on various factors. It makes a difference what discipline students are in, how much experience they have, and what their interests are. It can go toward improvisation (this can of course also include instrumentalists), or deeper into voice sounds when it's for more experienced singers, or into notation and composition if it's for creative writing or composition students. I have a lot of strategies for all these forms. For instance, some ways of having them compose vocal work for a group of people where they are divided to voice different parts. Even with elementary school children this has yielded beautiful results. I often include an explanation on how to gradually develop specific voice techniques, and always give warnings on what sounds can damage the voice if you produce them too long or too loud.

Cadence: Which living sound poets currently excite you?

Blonk: None at all really, I'm afraid...I mean, there are quite a few whose

work I respect, especially some older ones, some of whom are already deceased. I also did some collaborations, for instance with Michael Lentz, Jörg Piringer, Julien Ottavi and Joachim Montessuis, but they seem to have petered out. More exciting things for me are happening in new music, both composed and improvised. Maybe it has to do with the great difficulty of finding presentation opportunities for sound poetry, as it's far less of a recognized discipline than either music or literature.

Cadence: What are your interests outside of the creative arts? Guilty pleasures?

Blonk: Ha-ha, what pleasures are guilty? I'd rather not tell. What's certainly not guilty: I love to go out for walks and bike rides, taking advantage of the beautiful surroundings of my town Arnhem. Also, I like being in the mountains. I have done biking in the Alps and Pyrénées as well. As an artist, I can feel guilty when I escape from creative work. A favorite way is reading American crime novels. I especially like L.A.-based books. I've read all of James Ellroy - after reading and rereading Chandler of course.

Cadence: The final questions have been given by other artists to ask you:

Theo Bleckmann (vocalist) asked: "Thank you for including me here. I adore Jaap. I invited him to my series at the old Stone in the East Village. Here's my vocal nerd question (been getting into vocal science during this quarantine a bit too much- LOL) - Throughout all your incredibly wild vocalizations, have you ever had concerns or incidents of vocal injury or fatigue, and how do you keep (vocally) fit for the long haul?"

Blonk: I am lucky to be blessed with a strong set of vocal cords, I assume. I have never had any long-lasting damage to the voice. On a tour with performances every night, I may be a little hoarse in the morning, but in the course of the day my voice recovers completely, and it gets even better while the tour lasts. Some techniques I had to build up slowly over the years, such as inhaling sounds. As I had found out I could trust I wouldn't damage my voice permanently, I have sometimes consciously hurt it temporarily, such as in the recording of the Tristan Tzara Dada poems that consists of 410 repetitions of the German word 'brüllt' (roar, scream) on my Flux de Bouche CD. After that it took 3-4 days to recover. With my BRAAXTAAL trio I did a tour in 1995 as a support act for The Ex. It was the first time we played Rock venues, and in the course of a week, my voice dropped about a fifth. It changed our music towards getting more rough and extreme, as documented on the second BRAAXTAAL CD, Speechlos. On the recent New Start recording session with my Retirement Overdue band, I scheduled Bernstein's "Somewhere" near the end of the third day because I knew only then I would be able to sing it in the low register I wanted it to be in. Completely different are

the sounds created by extreme air pressure in my 'cheek synthesizer' technique. At first, when applying the pressure very suddenly, I almost fainted, but now I can handle it easily.

Cadence: What are daily practice sessions like for you?

Blonk: I don't do daily practice sessions anymore. I only practice when it's required for learning a new piece or a new type of improvisation. I did a lot in the past: breath training, simple singing exercises, articulation etudes with a metronome, uvular trills, inhaling sounds, lip and cheek sounds, etc. My daily activities are studying, learning, inventing, and creating in different fields. There's always been this discrepancy between how most people see me, which is only as a vocalist, and how I see myself, which is most of all, a maker of things: music, sound art, text, and visual work. That's totally understandable of course. People see me on stage, and even in concerts where I do more electronics than voice and the vocal parts stand out because they are visually more striking and direct. Here I'd like to relate an experience. In 2016 I did a 3-week U.S. tour. Among the CDs I brought were 5 copies of the most recent at the time: August Ananke, a mostly quiet record of purely electronic music. As all my performances involved vocals, I hadn't been able to sell a single copy of this. Then at the last concert, an acoustic voice performance in a small cafe in Boston, the barkeeper asked me if I had some music to play at intermission. I gave him August Ananke, and at the beginning of the second set I succinctly told the audience they had just heard a bit of my latest record. Then I sold all 5 of them after the show, and I could have sold more...

Maja Solveig Kjelstrup Ratkje (vocalist) asked: "You started out as a sound poet in your twenties, reciting Hugo Ball, and then continued with Kurt Schwitters' "Ursonate," and then we know the rest! Did you reflect upon music also already at that time? How did you get into music collaborations, and has your view on what music can be changed from then till now?"

Blonk: Most people indeed think I started out as a sound poet, but it's not true. I started playing saxophone in 1973, when I was 20, and learned to read music. In 1976 I started to compose my own pieces. They were very simple at first but got more sophisticated pretty soon. I studied books on music theory, such as for instance Vincent Persichetti's Twentieth Century Harmony, Hindemith's books on counterpoint, René Leibowitz on twelve-tone composition and William Russo's Composing for the Jazz Orchestra. In 1977 I discovered Hugo Ball's sound poems, in 1979 Kurt Schwitters' "Ursonate," and in 1981 I did my first public performances with the voice. By that time, I had already done a lot of concerts with several ensembles, including my own, playing saxophone only. So all of my first music collaborations, also improvised, were with saxophone (plus a growing arsenal of toy instruments and other rubbish). From 1984 on, I started to use the voice in improvisation. You can say indeed that this changed my view

on what music can be. So many new sounds turned out to be able to function musically. Only then I realized the wideness and validity of Varèse's definition "Music is organized sound." The major changes after that were: starting with electronic effects and samplers (from 1990 on), using the laptop as an instrument (from 1998 on), and getting back to mathematics after almost 30 years (in 2006).

Maja Solveig Kjelstrup Ratkje also asked: "Were you the first to perform the "Ursonate" backwards?"

Blonk: As far as I know, yes, I am the first and only person to recite some of the "Ursonate" backwards. It's a nice story how this happened. After my 1986 LP of the piece had been banned by Schwitters' son, and performances had been prohibited, I decided to make an illegal cassette recording of it under the pseudonym Reverof Zrem (retrograde of 'Merz Forever', 'Merz' being Schwitters' personal brand of Dada art). I think this gave me the idea of reciting the Scherzo of the "Ursonate" from the beginning until half-way, and then backwards to the beginning. So, I had, so to say, taken my words back and not recited the piece at all, and thus not violated any copyright. This was how I recorded it on the cassette, which was produced in 399 copies and has become a bit of a collector's item. At one point I saw a copy offered in Discogs for some 180 dollars.

Maja Solveig Kjelstrup Ratkje also asked: "What are pros and cons in experiencing a live performance compared to a recording? Is it two very different things? How about free improvisation contra composing?"

Blonk: I assume you mean the experience as a performer. It's an interesting topic. For me it differs greatly, dependent on what is performed or recorded. In performing or recording improvised music with other people, for me there is almost no difference. The main thing is the cutting-edge concentration on what's happening musically every second, regardless of the presence of an audience. In recording a composition, it's different. There's always the awareness that you can do it again, do a part of it again to be edited in later. This was different in the old days before digital recording, when multi-track tape was quite expensive, and you might not be able to afford an extra take. That created a different type of tension. About composing itself, there's a wide range. Sometimes it comes close to free improvisation, for instance when I write spontaneously invented sound poetry. Then, when I compose without mathematical methods, it involves a lot of trying, listening and changing. At other times it's like something is just given to me. It also happens when I have a mathematical structure that is so beautiful that I feel I cannot change it after converting it into music (or visuals, for that matter), no matter what it sounds or looks like. It's about truth. In composing, I also mix free improvisation with computer systems. For the album I am currently working on, *Ingletwist Fragments*, I feed the dictation feature of the computer improvised gibberish that it 'translates' into English text, which I then scramble again with mathematical methods, to get the lyrics for the album.

Joan La Barbara (vocalist/composer) asked: "What are your memories of "Messa di Voce," the collaboration in which we were co-composers/vocalists working with interactive media and graphics [designed by Golan Kevin and Zachary Lieberman]. It was a tour de force for many reasons - not the least of which was cutting edge technology that was somewhat "uncooperative."

Blonk: Yes, my main memories of this project was waiting for Golan and Zach to get the software running correctly...Both in the period before the premiere in 2003 at Ars Electronica in Linz, when I was keeping myself healthy with long walks in the hills, only to meet the two guys with even paler faces after struggling with coding and debugging another night. This was understandable because it was indeed quite a pioneering technology at the time. But I was somewhat surprised to find the same thing happening again before the last performance of the piece, in 2009 in New York. I had an apartment in Manhattan for a whole week, but we ended up having just one rehearsal for the performance. I remember Joan and I both thought the artistic result would have been a lot better with more rehearsal time. In the actual situation we felt at times we hardly got beyond demonstrating the software.

Charmaine Lee (vocalist) asked: Sound poetry has historically been closely tied to significant cultural moments - wars, political movements, Dada etc. Where do you see its function and relationship with today, if at all? Has the practice reached its full potential through the iconic 20th century works, or are there ways for the medium to further its expression?

Blonk: To start with the last part, I think it's always possible to further its expression, as long as there are creative practitioners. I'll keep trying! The bad thing is, it has become more and more marginalized. Indeed, in the 20th century there were these movements that sound poetry was a part of, that had some importance in the general field of culture, like Dada, the Concrete Poetry movement (mainly in the 1950s), Fluxus in the '60s and '70s. There's nothing like that nowadays. Last summer I went through my archives, throwing most of it away, and I saw that in the three years 1993-1995 I had done a total of 50 radio performances just in the Netherlands. All of them with sound poetry, all of them with decent fees. Nowadays I should be happy if I get one radio appearance in three years, and I won't get any payment except for my travel expenses. Money is governing the media in my country now. The main target is the numbers of spectators/listeners. I realize of course that in many other countries, like the U.S. for instance, it has been like that forever.

Patty Waters (vocalist) asked: "How do you prepare yourself emotionally and physically before a performance?"

Blonk: Emotionally, I don't need any preparation. I know the 'holy fire' will be there right away when I get on stage. It has probably helped that I performed on many occasions where my time was limited to 5 minutes

or so (at exhibition openings for instance, or big poetry festivals), and I had to be fully present instantly. Physically, I have to work on the voice only after a hiatus in performing. A few days of relaxed exercise for about an hour each day, mostly soft sounds: yawning sounds, going from lowest to highest register, fast little sounds, quick transitions to different techniques, calling possibilities into my awareness again. Sometimes I do that while playing some music I improvise along with. But when I have frequent performances, I don't need any preparation for the next one.

Phil Minton (vocalist) asked: "Do you still play any saxophone? I'm playing trumpet again and finding new stuff in my eightieth year."

Blonk: Oh, that's nice...it might occur to me too, who knows? I still have all my saxophones, from soprano to baritone, but they have been stashed away in a corner of my attic for 25 years now. I have been thinking of getting my alto out - that's my favorite - and maybe it'll indeed happen before I get to my eightieth year.

Recordings mentioned (see jaapblonk.bandcamp.com)

Six Sound Poems by Hugo Ball (forthcoming, double CD with two versions of the poems)

Ten Chosen Pieces (digital album)

Blonk, Mallozzi & Vandermark (Kontrans 367, 2020)

New Start, by Jaap Blonk's Retirement Overdue (Kontrans 1066, 2020)

Antonin Artaud's To Have Done with the Judgment of God (Kontrans 666, 2020)

Pioneer Works Vol. 1 & 2 (Balance Point Acoustics, 2019)

Klinkt (Het Balanseer, 2013)

Post-Human Identities with Maja Ratkje (Kontrans 651, 2005)

MAJAAP with Maja Ratkje (Kontrans 850, 2004)

Dworr Buun by BRAAXTAAL (Kontrans 448, 2001)

Consensus by Splinks (Kontrans 1545, 1999)

Speechlos by BRAAXTAAL (Kontrans 244, 1997)

BRAAXTAAL (Kontrans 939, 1993)

Flux de Bouche (Staalplaat, 1993)

Art books:

Antonin Artaud by Jaap Blonk (2020): <http://jaapblonk.com/Pages/ana.html>

111 Recipes (2019): <http://jaapblonk.com/Pages/111R.html>

On Tractatus One (2018, out of print): [http://jaapblonk.com/](http://jaapblonk.com/OutOfPrint/on_tractatus_one.pdf)

[OutOfPrint/on_tractatus_one.pdf](http://jaapblonk.com/OutOfPrint/on_tractatus_one.pdf)

Traces of Cookery / Kochspuren (2018): <http://jaapblonk.com/Pages/toc20.html>

Fehlberliner U-Wirr (2017): <http://jaapblonk.com/Pages/fbuw.html>

Traces of Speech / Sprachspuren (2012, out of print): http://jaapblonk.com/OutOfPrint/Traces_of_Speech.pdf

Visual work:

<http://jaapblonk.com/Pages/scores.html> and Facebook