

## Taking Things Apart

Ausland, Berlin, Germany

On a chilly yet humid late November evening, a handful of people are waiting outside Ausland, a small Prenzlauer Berg space that presents project based events ranging from concerts to theatre, dance and film screenings. Dubbed a micro-festival, Taking Things Apart is a three day event curated by Gretchen Blegen that explores a range of approaches to sound and performance, with a focus on first-time collaborations and new projects. Tonight's seating is limited to 40 people; there's something quite special about Ausland's intimate events drawing a few dozen devotees to see an experimental concert.

As the seated audience quiets down, PHILO takes to the stage. Behind a full drum set and a small modular synthesizer, she spends the better part of an hour bending silent, noise and occasional rhythmic patterns. She hinges one chaotic

patch on the thread of a drum beat before plunging back into disjointed percussion accents to unleash an electronic outburst. Hers is a highly unstable, utterly mesmerizing kind of chemistry.

Next up is a new duo consisting of composer Lea Bertucci and Gustavo Costa, who runs Porto's experimental hub Sonoscapia. I can't help but smile under my mask seeing Costa's table of noise-making detritus. His collections of springs, wires, fans, motors and mad scientist dumpster filler reminds me of the first time I saw Adam Bohman perform, his odd collection of discarded everyday objects similarly suggesting little about their sonic potential. Briefly introducing their collaboration, Bertucci recalls being stranded in Porto during March 2020 and finding solace through collective improvisation. As Berlin is ready to implement a new set of lockdown restrictions, the sense of fear and

uncertainty she evokes is particularly timely. Bertucci's soft drones and delicate field recordings punctuated by her clarinet add a warm tone to Costa's myriad metallic, aquatic and wooden textures. The result is as harmonious as it is dissonant, offering the sonic balm of two improvisors finding the right balance.

However, the emotional climax of the evening is reserved for Holland Andrews. Using a minimalist set-up of two microphones, a few pedals and a clarinet, Andrews shifts between opera, noise, spoken word and what seems like fragments from a stand-up routine with ease and grace. Going in without any expectations, their performance is perhaps the most unexpected of the festival. It is a dramatic rollercoaster that hits you right in the feels as they conjure trauma, love songs and childhood memories with a voice oscillating between an angelic soprano and heavily distorted growls.

On Sunday, things are more subdued as Pedro Oliveira delivers a new meditative synthesizer and voice piece featuring Fernanda Lira. Though it's not immediately apparent, the work is about borders and colonialism. However, its deep, looming drones and heavy fog machine evoke a dark undercurrent.

Hilã Lahav and Catalina Fernandez share a collaborative new piece, a sparkling collage of field recordings, overheard conversations and handmade instruments. As Fernandez performs from the furry overhead sound booth, Lahav becomes the focal point. She plays various tubes, flutes and objects that blend in with sounds of birds, traffic and disembodied voices. In a way, their set reminds me of the claustrophobic days of lockdown. Over two nights, the audience's sense of curiosity drives their openness to listen and be surprised.

Andra Amber Nikolayi

## Billy Bultheel & Viviana Abelson: *Unter Kammermusik*

Landeszeughaus, Graz, Austria

As a collaborator with artist Anne Imhof, Belgian composer Billy Bultheel has created the music for her ambitious and immersive performance pieces *Sex* and *Faust*. He has a particular talent for orchestrating physically emotive tableaux, designed around the contours (historical and acoustic) of a given performance space. His work is about presence. This makes him a perfect choice for this commission for the *Give Rise To* series curated by Cathrin Meyer of the Halle Fur Kunst Steiermarkt. Future *Give Rise To* commissions include new work by Colin Self, another performer who deals in interconnectedness and expansive storytelling.

*Unter Kammermusik* (*Under Chamber Music* in English) is an intimate affair for four musicians – in collaboration with artist Viviana Abelson, who has created the look of the production and designed

instruments including a snakelike, sectioned horn painted in stripes (the serpent), a ghostly drumkit draped with white latex, a huge drum on its side, the size of a cutaway of a giant redwood and lit like the lunar surface, and two metal sheets, hung like suspended whiteboards, that are played as percussion.

They're all arranged among the heaving shelves of the Landeszeughaus, or Styrian Armoury. It was built in the mid-17th century as a defence against the Ottoman Empire, and holds some 32,000 pieces of weaponry and armour. Its rows of helmets remind me of the skulls in the Paris Catacombs; elsewhere, walls are covered by swords and cuirasses. So much money hoarded; so many people, all gone. It's a charged space for sure.

The four performers are all outfitted in long black wader-like trousers, rubberised jackets, gilets echoing the armour on the walls and sturdy, chunky boots – like a D&D gaming party who might have stopped by a fetish club en route. The piece begins

## *Rover Metro*".

Fly Anakin's short set is almost as laid-back, rapping alongside a lone DJ in a balaclava, hunched over an SP-404 sampler. The MC's quick, precise flow holds the crowd, with complicated rhyme schemes dancing across soft, often drumless tracks. And then, just as it feels like it's over, the DJ steps up and pulls off the headgear, revealing Siifu himself. Together, the pair dive into three cuts from 2020's *Flysiifu*'s LP, and things really kick off. Gazing straight up at the low ceiling, Siifu drags his rhymes from hell: "*They say dead white faces supposed to keep you alive/I been listening to my demons, talking to God/It's like three different convos, can't make up my mind...*".

When he hops back onstage for the midnight set, Siifu is disguised again, wearing a ski mask to burn incense under

with low, foghorn noises and sombre, almost military flutes rumbling ominously, before percussionist Alexander Iezzi begins to hammer the metal sheets, moving from painterly taps of thunder to a full pelt rattling tattoo, as a flute blows a long, low note again and again.

The musicians all wear torches attached to their foreheads, illumining their paths through the space, and there is a tenderness to their choreography, as they venture forth on solo quests (a memorable scene has Iezzi on his back, bashing away at the ghostly draped drums from beneath like a cross between a mechanic and an exorcist) or come together to play in small groups.

The movements shift from aggression to grace and gentleness. At one point the two flute players, Rebecca Lane and Adam Sinclair, stand back to back as their harmonies entwine in a joyous fugue; hints of the baroque emerge, adding to a sense of chivalric order, as their stance suggests two fighters who have each other's backs,

ready to take on all comers. It doesn't hurt that there are slings on the players' backs for their instruments that look like they could sheath a sword or a bow and arrow.

Later, Bultheel shows me video clips of an earlier staging of the piece in Berlin, in a swimming pool at the Schinkel Pavilion. A percussionist stands waist deep in water at the opening to rail and thrash against the metal sheets, in a last tilt against elemental forces – as the metal reflects the ripples of the pool below and a figure watches scenes from above, seagodlike on a lifeguard's chair.

In either setting, it's hard not to feel swept up into some kind of epic adventure. But the minimal ensemble, and the feelings of connection to the immediate space that their compassionate phrasing and gestures evoke, are a jolt to the present, where there are no maps and the future remains unresolved. However you roll the dice, it's quite a journey, and Bultheel makes sure we're all in it together.

Emily Bick

## Pink Siifu

Strange Brew, Bristol, UK

It has always struck me as odd that Public Enemy's best album kicks off with Dave Pearce hyping up London's Hammersmith Odeon, an unlikely opening shot for an American apocalypse. If any contemporary release can survive comparison to *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back*, it's Pink Siifu's swirling 40 track *NEGRO DELUXE*, and this tiny room in Bristol seems an equally unlikely place to encounter it. For their low-key opening act, Strange Brew have booked local laptop duo O\$VMV\$M, plus two of Bristol's finest MCs, Birthmark (recently heard on Coldtron's fantastic *Live At The Laundromat* cassette) and Manonmars. Their bars are hilariously deadpan, with the latter boasting that his weed can "*Leave a trail of smoke behind me like a*

Marcus Garvey's pan-African flag. The room fills with feedback and smoke, and his band – NEGRO 6'1 – head into a slow jazz piece, led by Chris Williams's echoing trumpet. "Wake up!" the MC shouts as he drifts about the stage, before ducking to coax fragments of KRS-One and Hendrix from his sampler. And then – with a snap of his fingers – the group crash into new territory, ripping through three hardcore punk cuts. Having stood mesmerized for half an hour, the crowd happily turns into a mosh pit.

This sonic gumbo spreads across 80 minutes, as the six musicians rush through the disparate elements of Siifu's work. The show's more than just eclectic: it's almost synaesthetic, a trip into one man's head via a collage of TV headlines, squalls of free jazz, sirens, punk screams and feedback. And there are great tunes

too: near the end, even Dilla gets dragged into the mix, and a strutting cover of "Fuck The Police", stripped of its airy flutes, is boiled down to a heavy funk.

On drums, Mekala Session stands out: a mad scientist, messing about with gaps and accents, endlessly unpicking and remaking the beat. And the same restlessness can be heard in Siifu's bars. "*I'm tired, but I can't fall asleep*", he raps during "Nation Tyme", sounding angry and exhausted, but also burning with creativity. Reworking the song, he arrives at a new chorus, urging the Bristol crowd to join him as he chants Amiri Baraka's revolutionary lines. It turns out (of course) that his music is right at home here: a winter singalong for a city and a nation still wondering what to do with its dead slavers.

Rob Turner