

Turn/Stile: Remixing Udo Kasemets' *CaleNdarON*

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Abstract

Udo Kasemets' *CaleNdarON*, a sound-script that engages the Mayan calendar to birth random-chance composition, poses unique difficulties in the electronic age. As a techno-turntablist---and potential hermeneutist---of *CaleNdarON* at the Vancouver New Music Society's Link-Age Festival (2002) [1], I cut an approach to grasping this challenging script for sixty minutes of sound by six musicians. To play the turntable over the laptop, to scratch the binaries of nature/culture and mind/body through the manifold temporalities of Mayan numerology, and to face the demands of the *scriptual-logos* proved deceptively exhaustive while catalysing a questioning of the script, the technology, and the techniques through a collision of historical records: the present-day turntablist clasping a living member of yesterday's avant-garde, Udo Kasemets.

Spinning the Context

That phonographic experimentation and multiple directions of the avant-garde were forced into hiatus and perhaps never fully recovered after their dispersal during the two World Wars is a sad epitaph of the history of modernity. However,

Douglas Kahn notes that "in the two decades following World War II an abundance of artistic activities incorporated new approaches to sound" [2]. It was during these two decades that Estonian composer Udo Kasemets attended the Kranichstein Institute for New Music in Darmstadt (1950), studying Ernst Krenek, Edgard Varèse and Hermann Scherchen before immigrating to Canada in 1957. It was "around 1960" that Kasemets "totally abandoned the above concepts and moved toward open forms, special notations, mixed media, audio-visual interactions, sound texts and electroacoustics" after being exposed to the work of John Cage [3]. Kasemets' movement toward what Kahn calls the *all sound and always sound* of Cage [4] was dedicated: "He withdrew most of his earlier compositions from circulation and concentrated solely on creating and presenting music and mixed media art reflecting rapid and vigorous changes taking place in the culture and technologies of the latter half of the century" [5].

There are three junctures to be traced. The first is the proliferation of the avant-garde of the early 20th Century, from the Futurists to DADA and sound-poetry; the second is the generation, separated by two wars, that followed, and to which Kasemets belongs, including the developments of Fluxus and Happenings, Iannis Xenakis, electroacoustic music, and Minimalism. John Cage, it could be said, straddled the first and second junctures.

The third juncture is the flourishing of "contemporary electronic music," be it pop and rock permutations (Kraut rock, New Wave, industrial music) to African-

American innovations (funk, disco, Chicago house, Detroit techno, electro, hip-hop, and their AfroFuturist movements), including their "avant-garde" tendrils (IDM, minimal techno, lowercase and microsound, microhouse, clicks 'n' cuts). At the tail end of the third juncture I find myself magnetized by the tragically short *first* exploration of technology, and it is this desire that awakens a fourth juncture in the history of "electronic" music, where, at the limits of today's "experimental" scene, a return to considering the technology and apparatus of performance and the very means of composition places the "producer" at the heart of a nascent history. This thirst for productive experimentation that so drove Russolo (even in his dark passion for War) and Varèse is sampled as a catalyst for combatting the pessimism of the postmodern milieu. It is to the surviving members of the second juncture that today's phonographists and computer musicians are turning to learn of the first forays into the technological unknown of aurality. Unfortunately, the average DJ knows little of these junctures (sketched here only as arbitrary histories to facilitate an understanding in this context). Conversely, among the academy, an appreciation of the African American traditions of rhythm and percussion---what was considered "the music of the future" by Cage---is scant [6]. Thinking of another turn-of-the-previous-century author, Proust, it is perhaps worth recalling that to move forward is to remember. A turntable rotates endlessly to circulate the movements of sound. To *turn* back, to glance behind, is to scratch out a history in the revolutions of wax. At the juncture of *chance*—temporal performativity—the apparently antiquated phonograph eclipses the computer. Wax, the loop, and the turn prepares the way for scripting

Kasemet's junctured-sound in ways tactile which the circuitry of the laptop renders untouchable. Beyond tactility, the laptop encodes multiple time as variables, determining, in the process, the process of process itself, making *possible* an algorithm of generative numerosity. Until the laptop can be tampered, decodified, *broken*, it remains a control device. There is more to be said of the laptop and the turntable (we shall return to this), for the turntable, like the failure of the script, demands impossible time and impossible touch. To perform, at that moment where the performance cannot be performed, the script becomes impossible to follow, the moment of impossibility or what would be judged as codified failure, a new *stile* in the dial of time, a new time of listening (and to consider this time as unique) is to cut the grooves into skips and smooth them through burns. To turn a new stile of sound, *Turn/Stile*. To work with Udo Kasemets and to re-turn a century aged tradition of phonographic experimentation so it rotates face-to-face with postmodern DJ histories and techniques, scratched through the mediation of post-Cagean composition and cut and burnt with an avid ear for the panaural, is to solder these traditions and histories, to conjure and mix inspiration from wax and wires, and to sonically sound the way into unnoted sound/scapes.

stile

- \Stile\, n. [See Style.] 1. A pin set on the face of a dial, to cast a shadow; a style.
2. Mode of composition. May I not write in such a stile as this? –Bunyan

01. parameters of the *CaleNdarON*

Udo Kasemets' conceptual score for an undetermined number of electroacoustic, electronic, or otherwise amplified musicians presents a unique conundrum. This dilemma arises in the interpretation of the script, which calls for a prepared yet improvised reading of the graphic 'event-sounds'. These pictographemes are numerative illustrations sampled from Mayan calendar permutations, presented for the musicians as sonic events to produce in a certain timeframe. The temporal is delimited by the random drawing of shuffled playing cards, by each performer, to ascertain an event's duration. This interpretative intensity---already a matter of lightning-speed poetic hermeneutics---is compounded when a musician cannot easily construct the two sample sets as required, as in the case of irregular uses of a turntable, where sources cannot be quantified beforehand. By engaging tactile technology that at base wires the temporalities of the Mayan script, the difficulties of inhabiting the historical disjunctive are embodied in the momentum of the performer.

The following *remix* proceeds from Kasemets' allowance for "mental abstracts" in interpreting the script. The necessity of abstraction conjoins an equally necessary physicality, as the mindwork of preparation meets the bodywork of improvisation, a work of manifold temporalities in the performance of sound. The script called for a (re)interpretation of its body from the beginning. The permutations of the script, in their immediacy, call for an engaged *embodiment in performance* at the same time that mental abstracts are schematized, before the actual performance,

to de/construct a *performative hermeneutics*. The primacy of the mental conjoined the body, as question mark, through the force of touch, while an embodied immediacy called for the challenge of interpretation in the demands of otherness from the script's graphic-logic. To fail to perform this script, or to perform it poorly, in my mind and felt with the strains of my body, would be to fail to struggle with the demands of its peculiar *scriptual-logos*.

The representation of *logos*, as the sign of *possible logic*, or performative order, is questioned through the manifold nature of the Mayan calendar used to construct scriptual authority. Whereas the Gregorian calendar sets into stone the demarcation of days and their purposes in a fixed manner, the Mayan calendar permutes each day. According to Kasemets' script, the Mayan calendar combines 52 solar cycles, each consisting of 18 months of 20 days, plus 5 extra "unlucky" days, totalling 365 days that are permuted with 73 ritual cycles, which are "intermeshing rotations of 20 day names and [the] numbers 1 to 13," totalling 260 days. The "same combinations of month and day names and numbers recur only in 52 years" [7]. (Possibly one can experience every day as unique during her lifetime.) The "nameless days" fissure that which is beyond or before the *logos*, for these are days of fasting and mourning. The Mayan calendar autodeconstructs a *logos* which, if we continue to utilise these Western philosophical paradigms, dances an embrace with *khōra*, the mourning of futurity and the difference of each moment.

02. script temporalities: numbers

Along with the complex score of 52 chronologically sequenced notations, temporally delimited by randomized playing cards, “each performer prepares two distinct sets of sound ‘samples’. Each ‘sample’ has to be of such a nature that it can be treated in multiple ways in matter of durations, amplitudes and other parameters, and also that it can be comfortably combined with other ‘samples’ either linearly or simultaneously.” The ‘samples’ are broken into two groups. Set 1 consists of 20 samples represented by the binary numerals (the 20 day names of the Mayan calendar). The corresponding day names and their symbolic meanings, provided by Kasemets, offer further signifying material. Playing proceeds as follows:

The score indicates which ‘samples’ are to be activated (either singly or jointly) during a given time segment. The Arabic numeral accompanying a given binary set indicates the number of ‘events’ to be presented during the segment. The underlined numeral is representing the name of the day of the segment, thus denoting a somewhat predominant treatment.

Set 2 consists of 4 samples, **x, y, z, Ø**, which represent the “names of 3 Mayan months and the sequence of 5 nameless days.”

These 'samples' should be, if possible, original or modified recordings of nature sounds (e.g. water, wind, whales, insects, birds). (They may or may not mix with, or influence, or be influenced by the 'samples' of the other set.)

Set 2 consisted of four records of Top 40 pop tunes. These included the 1999 Grammy Award Winners for Rap double-pack, the 12" Remixes of Donna Summer, and the Remixes of William Shatner (these records were given away to eliminate all records of these records). The choice of highly culturally encoded pop records over 'natural' sounds constituted a way to begin acknowledging the technological medium inherent to the production of permutative temporal sound. The first set of samples was *processed* from the burning and cutting of the second set, operations determined by the "relative durations of the activation of the 'sample' of the given letter. A vertical line (|) stands for a long(er), a dot (.) for a short(er) sound."

Amplification was determined through the playing cards. The cards themselves signify (red - loud(er); black - soft(er), rounded (hearts, spades) - sustained, smooth, long(er), pointed (diamonds, clubs) - detached, edgy, short(er)), as well as determine the set time for a series of actions (3 = 30 seconds, etc.). The performance should end for all performers at the same time, despite each performer working with a unique and random time-line.

03. *turn/stile* process: laptop vs. turntable

Although I have previously performed experimental turntablism [8], it was the *quantitative impossibility* of the turntable, unlike a laptop, which irrupted the phonograph as a manifold time-machine. To assemble 24 samples in software such as Max/MSP [9], and to code a patch that simply accounts for the variables, *executes* the *body* of the script. The lack of performativity and the ease at which the software would negotiate the challenges of the script scrubs the body of its sweat. The laptop becomes Burrough's Grey Room, the centre of *control*: a deep schematization of random elements is established and the laptop recites its enclosed domain of *techne*. Would there climax the erotic, the number-stroking card-flipping intensity? Would one love the machine or watch idly? Would there become the ability to radically interact with the machine as a deterritorialised instrument the way the turntable became? For the script is already *techne*, the code of the prosthetic body or soft-machine, that which temporalises the sweat of impossibility.

Although the "lack of gestural theatre" inherent to laptop performance decodes pop-music spectacle as Kim Cascone suggests [10], its newfound status as the academic acousmatic leaves *much to be desired*. The lack of gestural theatre allegorizes a broader schematic: the negation of interpretative impossibility through technological control [11]. Although there exists the possibility of improv-

coding software patches during performance, is it possible that we mime only an *encoded* impossible, an impossible not at all?

Thinking of Baudrillard, I realised that I would not be watching the laptop but the laptop would be watching me, and the audience would be watching me being watched [12]. A double panopticon, double simulacrum of power-gazing, control of control. To where is the rift assigned: the script or the software? To where is manifold, Mayan memory encoded? To be memory-lost and moment-foresaken in having *no record nor way of reproducing that same performance again*, is it possible to use a digital encoding system? To perform times of multiplicity is to *touch* duration, not program the memory bank of our current incarnations of the binary machine.

During the practice of *CaleNdarON*, Kasemets would say "it's all music." The transactions between performers---as this script calls on six bodies to interpret not only the script but to watch and hear the others---was by far the most pronounced amongst those who could conjure sound with impossible speed. With two performers on laptops, two on cd players, one performer on an electric violin and myself on turntable, the dominant sonic-cues were between myself and the violinist. Yet to conclude the purity of an atechnology or Ludditism would erase the ways in which one transacts with the machine through the other, the body of the script, which is to say, the bodies of the *other* performers, wired as the machinic-ensemble.

04. Scripting Turntablism

The turntable has a history with script not only through the avant-garde but in the realm of hip-hop. Several script-notations for scratching vinyl, including all manner of fader tricks and manipulations have been developed, as well as scores for "hip-hop operas." A competitor in the DMC Championships [13] for scratch-turntablism and beat-juggling is working from her own composition that determines the timing and placement of records and the tricks to be utilised. Although in the past this script has been memorized aurally and through touch, scripts by the likes of DJs Radar, A-Trak, and Jon Carluccio [14] have inscribed these difficult routines. My own history burns another path, of the experimental, of African-American music, if not Afrofuturist, via the advent of Detroit techno. Unlike hip-hop turntablism, the recognition of techno-turntablism has been scarce among academia and the electronic music world. Focused less upon the scratch, techno-turntablism emphasizes the speed and improvisation of each mix. Although scratching is common, it is the cutting of faders and the inventing of disruptive tricks such as feedback utilisation and off-beat synchronisation—while engaging the moving bodies of the audience through the transactive composition of a sonic voyage—that challenges the techno-turntablist [15]. Techno-turntablism is only at the dawn of its efforts to engage avant-garde techniques, including those pioneered by Janek Schaefer, Philip Jeck, Martin Ng, Martin Tétreault and others, as well as the turntable-instruments of Schaefer and Kitundu [16].

It is with a desire for rhythm and the otherworldly (the alien technologies of techno) that the first set of samples became *differential processes* upon the four records of the second set, which were also not the “nature” sounds Kasemets called for. Given the permutative *nature* of the script, it became *necessary* to revolve the binary with manifold temporality. From high-art ‘culture’ to *pop culture*. At a surface yet institutional level, Kasemets’ script is considered avant-garde, at the edge to pop-culture. If the script *is culture*, pop culture must be, by force of the binary (note the uses of *binary numbers* in this script) *nature(al)*. By embodying a logic that *spins* the *scriptual-logos*---a (dj) *mix* of theory and practice---the performative interpretation affects not through representation, similitude or mimesis but through the movement of the permutative “nature” of the script itself.

05. *smooth space striated space: two techniques, cut and burn*

There are two primary processes that construct Set 1 samples: *cuts* and *burns*. To parse the set, 20 sounds *from and for each record letter* were marked using tape, where either knife or fire were employed (remixed from the script, **0** as *fire*, **1** as *knife*). *Smooth and cut space* [17]:

1. In *cutting* vinyl, one striates space across a predetermined spiral of grooves that rotate a highly structured arrangement of sound. By cutting the record’s

grooves, one engages the pre-cut groove through the slicing and carving of grooves, the incision of inadvertant grooves (or skips or loops). Eventually a heavily striated surface will cease to be normatively playable and a multiple temporality of playing and listening must arise, as we cut this paragraph, as something beyond demonstration, with the knife itself: the Mayan calendar is a cut-up---the cut-up according to William S. Burroughs is erotic---the sounds cut-up *CaleNdarON*---to cut is to think---have been cut before this thought.

2. In *burning* vinyl, one melts groove to smooth, soft space, warm to the touch, accentuating the random travel of the needle across glacial sound-space.

Eventually a heavily-burnt surface will cease to contain grooved sound save for the whirring rotations of the turntable system and sounds normally unheard (such as electrical hum). "Silence" as *heard* by John Cage---the amplification of miniscule sound, the vibration of warm record-molecules and sound of melting, dripping wax [18]---liquifies the burn, calling for a *burning ear*.

06. Assembly Markings

i. After cutting or burning the vinyl, a number of separate and distinct sounds, as called for by the script, are performed utilising turntablist aspects (EQ, fader techniques, tone-arm rubber bands, mixer effects, reverse-playing, feedback, line noise). As these sounds are in relation to the *notes of duration*, often an element of impossibility arose, consisting of more *durations* than *sounds*. This meant that

one of the durations had to be an amount of silence. The performance became the work of a complex and unfolding remix, random and desperately haptic.

ii. When the record became so fully manipulated and affected that it became, in a movement of fury and love, *a time* to play the needle directly across spinning surfaces, such as the platter, tinfoil, and sandpaper (as the Mayan letter became effaced), there the subjectile was touched, as the rip, the surface beyond surface, and *heard* [19].

iii. When faced with a scriptural notation such as event-sound 13, performance process became *machinic* (scratch marks from this turntable beast). Body and hermeneutics became an all-encompassing act of irruptive and interruptive interpretation. Event-sound 13:

Record: \emptyset

Duration note: .

Predominant Binary: **01**

Further Binaries:

0101 1101 0011 1011 0111 1111 00001 10001 01001 11001 00101 10

With record \emptyset , *one short duration*, from a *burn*, of *13 sets of binary coda*, drawn a 3 of clubs, calling for *quiet*, and the total *event* (preparation, interpretation, in/decision and action) to *resound* within 30 seconds. This meant *incorporate*

silence with one single duration of 13 distinct sounds *through* one *quick* sonic movement from the surface of a *burn*. Simultaneously, the process: scratching the burn, the echo parameter on the mixer, EQ mid-hi and taps to the needle-head, final sideways scratch, the needle off the record, with the lighter held under its point, resulting in the needle catching fire and acidric smoke.

iv. Beyond the capacity of interpretation, although perhaps not the senses, was the symbolism of the Mayan day. Kasemets' *temporalities* abandon at least one element to evade the *script* (although it might be sounded, even in its absence). Just as there is silence, there is an interperformative gap where the meanings of the script resound via *infiltration*, as the moments of random accumulation, mixture, construction, and destruction cut-up silence. One grasps *interpretative silence*, a moment where *bodymind* cannot account nor perform. The script, as the demands of manifold, Mayan, if not alien temporalities, overwhelms the performer's dedication (or lack thereof) to the *scriptual-logic* of the script. The scripts rips itself apart. It temporalises rifts, and these are heard, even in their evasion. The script rips its scriptuality. It is at this moment---and these moments abound---that movements of disjunction *and* synchronicity transact with the performers, the machinic-ensemble. Too absorbed in the script itself, the *movements of failure* constituted the ensemble's improvisation as a bodymind machine failing its programs, failing to grasp all variables, and in their failure, giving chance to manifold time, to an experience of time beyond linearity, to

alien, Mayan temporalities. The playing of the impossible calendar, from riotous cacaphony to solitary silence, becomes *CaleNdarON*.

Acknowledgements

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9. See <http://www.cycling74.com> for information on Max/MSP software.
10. See: "Laptop Music---Counterfeiting Aura in the Age of Infinite
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15. See tobias c. van Veen, "Vinyl/auralism: A Manifesto of Sonic Wax," *Discorder* (March--April 2002).

16. Kitundu's website: <http://www.cpcarts.org/kitundu/instruments.htm/>, Schaefer's: <http://www.audioh.com/>. In the context of North American techno-turntablists, a few notable practitioners are (among a growing contingent) Toronto's Jeff Milligan, Montreal's the Mole, Windsor's Richie Hawtin, Winnipeg's Fishead, and Detroit's Claude Young and Jeff Mills.

17. Kahn considers Cage's "silence" in *Noise Water Meat*, pp. 158--241.

18. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "1440: The Smooth and the Striated," *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). Trans. Brian Massumi. "Smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space" (p. 474).

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