B(l)(e)(e)(n)dings
Dialogues Between Ancient and Novel Sonic Potentialities

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B(l)(e)(e)(n)dings *is an electroacoustic composition and performance, the result of three years of musical collaborations and research in several regions of Southern Africa (Mozambique, Eswatini and South Africa). In June 2018, I have collaborated with Cara Stacey, pianist and ethnomusicologist from Johannesburg, who plays several Southern African instruments, and Mpho Molikeng, musician, actor, and poet, who plays a number of instruments from Southern Africa. During the preparation of the project, in May 2018, I had the opportunity to interview the composer, filmmaker, and photographer Phill Niblock (well-known also for having produced the iconic Arthur Russell album* World of Echo)*. He generously provided unreleased 16 mm-footage of rural manual labour, shot in the 1970s in South Africa and Lesotho, transferred to digital. The two films are screened during the concerts.*

Fig. 1: B(l)(e)(e)(n)(d)ings. *Opening concert for ISEA 2018, Durban. Photo: Christo Doherty).*

Introduction

B(l)(e)(e)(n)dings (Forcucci 2019) is a performance relying on collaborative art prac-
tice, and research on indigenous technologies, namely, playing and composing
with groups of performers, while observing and analyzing the processes of devel-
opment and technologies of instrument building. The augmentation of the purely
material "thingness" and motility of the musical instrument is proposed here as
sonic potential allowing dialogues with the spirits. The instruments involve in-
herent material processes and rituals in the Southern African cultural context.
For the current project the instruments played are from Southern Africa such as
umtshingo, nyungwe-nyungwe, budongo, kudu horn, lesiba, mokhope/umrhub-
he, whistle, sekhankula/mamokhorong, lekolilo, thomo / uhadi, umqangala, se-
kebeku, lekope, ipandula, and linak.

Some instruments relate in particular to the relationships between humans
and spirits: Mbira (thumb piano) is a spiritual instrument for the Shonas, Ven-
das, San, Bapedi and Batswana people. The nyungwe-nyungwe (from the family
of Mbira from Mozambique) may be used in some cases in bira-type ceremonies.
However, the musical bows or umtshingo do not have spiritual purposes, accord-
ing to Cara Stacey. The horns instruments (signal horns like the kudu horn) have
a spiritual component for doctors or are played to signal messages from the chief.
Lesiba is spiritual by nature and the San people conduct their ceremonies using
them as one of their mediums according to Mpho Molikeng, who adds that most if
not all of the instruments he plays have or had spiritual connections depending of
the ethnic groups of Southern Africa and the epoch.

The term augmentation is proposed here to address the sonic involved in the
relationships between the materiality of the instruments and their spiritual po-
tentials. The development of novel interactions between the physical instruments,
based on live composition (*Echzeitmusik*), and the potentialities such instruments
convey, is central to our pursuit. However, as Roy Ascott proposes, matter is not
only matter: "quantum physics makes plain that matter is not composed of mat-
ter, but reality is merely potentiality. The immaterial connectedness that defines
quantum reality is a quality we associate equally with the spiritual domain [...]"
(Ascott 2005: np). In this sense, the sonic involves potentiality for the instruments
to perform as mediums to the spiritual world. Obviously, blending Western con-
temporary sonic forms with African aesthetics, and vice versa, is not new and
can already be observed, for example, in Nigerian Art Music (Omojola 2013), or in
Gqom house music emerging in the 2010's from the townships of Durban (Lobley
in Reily & Brucher 2018).

Augmenting Instruments

The main reason to have started *B(l)(e)(e)(n)dings* is that knowledge and technology related to these indigenous instruments tend to disappear. The older masters live in rural environments, and the young people want to be in cities to get more opportunities, leading to the loss of that particular knowledge and the material transmission of that knowledge. The recontextualisation of the instruments reactivated in an electroacoustic environment, as a collaborative endeavour with live composition, seems preferable to me than the instruments dying into an archive vault or a collection lying behind glass. What kind of music might emerge from the combination of indigenous ancestral technology from Southern Africa and electroacoustic/digital technology?

When I was introduced to the musician, composer, and instrument builder Smiles Makama in Eswatini, I asked if his smilerphone, an instrument he invented out of seven superposed bow instruments, was a hacking of the bow instrument. His answer was clearly negative; instead, he advocated for an augmentation of the bow instrument to provide it with more dimensions. Makama claimed the smilerophone is a bush synthesiser or a telephone to the gods. He also added that the seven bow instruments correspond to the seven chakras. Such ideas are entirely related to the purpose of instruments as communication devices between humans and spirits. Rituals are structures for the life of communities and societies; these are addressed here to investigate technologies emerging from them. The instrument is no longer a bow instrument *per se*, but an augmentation of it, a hyperobject or multiplication of bows. Furthermore, it lost none of its function as an object yet it became "else", another thing.

Fig. 2: Smiles Makama's Smilerphone. *Photo:*
Bert Barten.

Thingness in the Sonics

B(l)(e)(e)(n)dings is also a transformation of the instruments and their intrinsic sonic properties; *they* convey the sound, not us; they are augmented and exist in this context only when we (Cara Stacey, Mpho Molikeng, Luca Forcucci) are together as trio, duo, or as a solo version. In the last case the instruments become an acousmatic version. Acousmatic means the instruments are recorded, reproduced, and recombined. They themselves are no longer present, only their sounds removed from their respective causality. Furthermore, *B(l)(e)(e)(n)dings* is diffused over eight channels, another layer of abstraction within the thingness of the sonic.

A third layer is created by filmic images provided by Phill Niblock. I usually avoid the visual in my work since I believe it tends to distract from the sonic. However, while I was discussing my project with Niblock, he generously proposed to give me his Lesotho and South African footage. The notion intrigued me. I think, the combination enriches the experience brought by the performance through abstracting each present element and augmenting the immersive nature of the work.

Niblock's footage refers to the movement gestures of labor while simultaneously contributing to an abstraction of all of the instruments present in *B(l)(e)(e)(n)dings*. The indigenous acoustic holds dialogues with the electronic and leads to novel forms: the instruments as objects become "else" – each a new entity removed from its original context, when they recombine their timbres with the visual and the spatialization within audience perception.

References

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