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Chance operations,
serendipity and no
small measure of
chutzpah all make up
the kaleidoscopic
sound art of

Janek Schaefer

Unveiling his first major
UK retrospective, the
architect-turned-
turntablist talks about
Ballardian sound
sculpture, mourns the
death of analogue TV

By Chris
Sharp. Photography by
Leon Chew



Janek Schaefer at home in Walton-on-Thames, November 2009

D O

T H E

H U S T L E

As I turn into his suburban driveway, Janek Schaefer is lurking outside his front door. He has a baby monitor in one hand and a hastily rolled cigarette in the other. It's a cool, misty November evening, but the No Smoking Indoors rule in this corner of Walton-on-Thames is inviolable. For the first time – but not the last – I'm struck by the contrast between the domestic trappings of Schaefer's environment and the maverick creativity of the work itself.

He's a gracious host; a fully trained house husband who revels in the everyday pleasures of family life and who insists on cooking a meal to accompany the indisciplined, tangential conversation that passes for this interview. Yet he has produced some of the most thought-provoking, elegant and insightful work that the nebulous and still developing field of sound art has to offer. And, over the last few years, mainstream recognition has started to come his way. In 2008, he won the British Composer of the Year award (for Sonic Art) and a Paul Hamlyn award for composers; this year his first comprehensive career retrospective takes place – the exhibition is currently up and running at the Bluecoat Gallery in Liverpool. Despite this groundswell of acclaim, though, his magpie mind still hasn't quite settled on a description of what he does.

"My first title is 'sound artist', I suppose, but what I do is really all-encompassing," he muses. "I'm a musician and a composer now – that's generally what I am, but sound art can be anything, and I've come through by producing installation art, under the umbrella of being experimental." Later, he returns to this question of definition. "I don't like calling it experimental music, because it makes me sound like a noodle, a boffin, a man who bangs pots and pans... Avant garde is kind of a nice phrase... Oh, it's very hard: a sound artist? What's that? I don't know," he sighs. "The one thing I've failed to do in life is successfully describe to a layman what it is that I do."

It's not surprising that Schaefer finds it hard to pin himself down. His work has always been concerned with the physicality of sound, but his emphasis – and methodology – has shifted radically over time. Early esoteric projects like *Skate* and *Wow* were low-tech attempts to wrest control away from the smooth progress of the conventional vinyl spiral and hand it back to the listener, whereas more recent work has been less aggressive; recordings like *Hidden Name* (made with Stephan Mathieu) and live concepts like *In The Last Hour* focus instead on the transcendent possibilities of sonic immersion. And Schaefer has always been – to borrow a smattering of computer jargon – platform-agnostic, as happy to embody his ideas in a DJ set or a one-off live performance as in a studio album or a site-specific installation. His approach to art is 'applied' rather than 'pure' – in fact, he's an unshamed opportunist who acknowledges the role played by dogged self-promotion in his increasing prominence. He doesn't sleep much, instead spending his nights online in a restless quest for a new opportunity, context or collaboration to spark off the next creative process. For him, the actual music making is less challenging than finding reasons, not to mention the financial incentive, to make it. "On the whole, I find sound making quite easy," he confesses. "I can do a whole concert in an hour, or an hour-long piece in a day, I just get on with it – it's the actual sitting down to do it that's the hardest thing. I always

write to deadlines and I don't do it until I have to – it's like writing an essay."

The analogy suggests that the younger Schaefer struggled with academia. "I was rubbish at school," he confirms. "I failed my O and A Levels..." He finally found a discipline that fitted in with the way he thought about the world when he was persuaded to enrol in an architecture course at Manchester Polytechnic. "I was spatially aware and practical; I got an A for my first ever project, and I was away. I ended up with a first class degree against all expectations. But I never actually wanted to be an architect. That would mean having a job, for a start." His degree led to the Royal College of Art, and another revelation. "I didn't know anything about how to build a building, but I knew how to tell stories, how to respond to situations and how to make things. Wow, it turned out that I'd been training to be an artist all along."

It wasn't long before he put this realisation into practice. In 1995, he spotted that Artangel – fresh from their success with Rachel Whiteread's *House* – were looking for contributions to a new site-specific project housed in a self-storage depot in Wembley. Schaefer's submission, *Recorded Delivery*, was a deft demonstration of his oblique imagination: a recording of a parcel's journey through the postal system, created by sending a dictaphone to the building staging the exhibition. The machine was set up to be triggered only when there was a sound loud enough to be recorded, so the piece was ingeniously self-editing. What emerged was a perfectly formed, 72 minute collage smearing together the most sonically interesting elements of the 24 hour journey, framing the casual profanity of sorting office conversation with grainy skeins of environmental sound. Co-curator Brian Eno was impressed. "Janek Schaefer's first soundwork, *Recorded Delivery*, remains one of the wittiest and most interesting in the field of Sound Art," he remarked. "It is elegant, economical and clever, and makes me wish I'd thought of it first."

Recorded Delivery was an early indication that Schaefer had little patience with airy abstraction or theoretical speculation. He repeatedly stresses that he likes to tell stories, wryly observing, "I find it hard to let things speak for themselves – I do generally like to chip in!" His titles are similarly communicative. "Calling something *Untitled* makes me a bit angry, to be honest. I'm called Janek and I've always loved being called something slightly exotic, and I've tried to live up to my name and my pieces should do the same. It should all be embodied in there."

Recorded Delivery was followed by *Outside-In* – an imaginary space sited at Camden Lock market in London, channelling real-time exterior noises into a strange, isolated interior and so expressing Schaefer's interest in what he called "dissociated sound" – and then by *The Memory Museum*, which drew inspiration from the JG Ballard novel *Concrete Island*. Installed in a cylindrical subway vent beneath the Westway flyover, this combination of delay loop and transmitter stored visitors' utterances and relayed them, for few brief moments, to passing motorists through their in-car radios.

These two works formed part of Schaefer's MA. They're potent enough, despite a slight academic stiffness. But other influences made themselves felt – in particular, epiphanic encounters with Mika

Vainio, Chris Watson and, especially, Philip Jeck. "He showed me that anything and everything is there waiting for you on vinyl. It's available all over the world, it costs pennies and you can use it as found sound, you can react to it and change it to make new music. Philip's music was a revelation. He just took some rubbishness, put it through some rubbish stuff, and out popped this majestic soundscape. I was absolutely ecstatic when I heard it."

Jeck's music was hands on, direct, free of abstraction; as soon as he left college, Schaefer sought ways to mine this vein of inspiration. "I'm quite good at making objects," he says, "so, after I graduated in 1998, I made a nice object." The Tri-Phonic turntable, as he christened it, was a triple tone-arm, infinite vari-speed, bi-directional, three disc record player – and although it was a work of art in itself, Schaefer thought of it more as a musical instrument. "For me, it was simply a tool to make new music – I wanted to be able to change physical sound in as many ways as I could, to make new compositions." Early experiments echoed the confrontational antics of plunderphonic pioneers John Oswald and Negativland, but soon he started to work with a set of self-cut locked-groove dubplates that opened up a more nuanced mode of expression. The CD *Out* (1999) collected pieces composed in this way. It was, effectively, his first album. Since then, as Schaefer freely admits, "Every single piece of music I've made has been released in one format or other. I don't have a cupboard full of things I didn't like." His manic self-documentation has given rise over the intervening decade to nine vinyl-only releases, 12 solo CDs, five albums of studio collaborations and three installation DVDs, not to mention any number of compilation appearances, specially conceived live performances and, increasingly, handmade objects and limited-run audio sculptures.

As we speak, our conversation is counterpointed by a shimmering, multi-timbral drone. It's emanating from Schaefer's most recent construction, which stands unobtrusively in the corner of the kitchen. Two loudspeakers are clasped together, their cones reversed so that they direct sound inwards. It's a typically concise Schaefer conceit, a simple re-imagining which is immensely suggestive, especially when the title is taken into account: *Inner Space Memorial* [For JG Ballard]. If *The Memory Museum* was a somewhat schematic response to Ballard's fiction, *Inner Space Memorial* is altogether more tender – an entirely human recognition of shared experience.

"By coincidence, I was reading Ballard's autobiography [*Miracles Of Life: From Shanghai To Shepperton*] when he died, and it was revelatory. I was struck by how he could be a cutting edge novelist and still provide support for his family at the same time, and by all his lovely observations about suburban life." Schaefer, a devoted father of two as well as an artist, clearly feels real empathy with the man who brought up three children singlehandedly only a mile or two away from where we are sitting. And *Inner Space Memorial* is a radiant tribute. The music seeping from the locked casket is a rolling, billowing, full-frequency gaseous rush, echoing organs unfolding endlessly while the hiss and crackle of vinyl suggest the euphoric affirmation of distant applause. Not surprisingly, it took an uncharacteristically long

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time to create. “It’s just one hovering piece, but it was really important to me that it shouldn’t be flat,” Schaefer says. “It was a bit like engineering, really – I was in there for four days subtly changing all the harmonies and pitches... quite hard work.”

Typically, it’s work that will find more than one outlet. Schaefer tends to extract maximum value from his creations, recasting installation pieces as CDs and enshrining performances on DVD. As well as appearing on a future album, the slowly spangling 20 minutes of *Inner Space Memorial* will also conjure into being 50 individual handmade 5" records; with the music on a continuous loop, each one will be lathe-cut at random, snaring whichever two minutes of sound happen to be playing at the time. It’s a subtle signal that Schaefer is gradually engaging more closely with what he describes as “the bling world of the white-walled mega-mansions of art” – if *Inner Space Memorial* is the original artwork (it’s a one-off, yours for £4500), the 5" discs are the numbered print edition.

The trajectory from *The Memory Museum* to *Inner Space Memorial* is emblematic of the way that Schaefer’s art has evolved over the last decade. In conversation, he’s disconcertingly open, airily discussing details of his private life, blithely unconcerned by the always running MP3 recorder. Similarly, his website is a painstakingly self-maintained archive offering a cornucopia of information, but it has a strangely confessional, stream-of-consciousness quality. Alongside

information about his projects there are family photographs, rambling meditations and a minutely detailed CV dating back to 1976. At the top, it says: “If you type in ‘Janek’ into google, I come up as the no 1 Janek on the planet – hooooorayyyy I say!”

Given this streak of self-absorption, it’s hardly surprising that Schaefer’s work has become increasingly infused with his own experience. Produced for the A Thing About Machines festival in Coventry, *Phoenix And Phaedra Holding Patterns* (for sruti box and nine portable radios), was inspired by the birth of his son three months previously. But perhaps his most fully realised blend of the personal and the public so far has been 2008’s genuinely affecting *Extended Play*. Schaefer’s mother was born in Warsaw in the middle of the Second World War, while his daughter was born in the West at a time of relative peace and prosperity some 60 years later. An installation initially created for the Huddersfield Art Gallery, *Extended Play* was based on these two very different sets of circumstances. “A celebration of hope, survival and new beginnings”, says Schaefer. Written for violin, cello and piano, it takes the melodic cadences from a piece of folk music broadcast by the BBC to the Polish resistance on the day his mother was born. The three parts were recorded onto separate vinyl discs, and placed on three old-fashioned gramophones fitted with motion sensors, so the movements of visitors to the gallery stopped and started playback randomly, thereby creating a continuously evolving composition.

“I like my work to use imperfections, to amplify them and make something beautiful,” he declares. “So the fact that the discs don’t all quite play at the same speed, or that the string sections don’t harmonise perfectly, that’s what makes the experience – the bitter emerges from the sweet and the sweet emerges from the bitter. I wanted to make it all beautiful, but the technology made me make it bittersweet...”

Like most all Schaefer’s work, *Extended Play* also exists as an album – but it loses a good deal of its impact when removed from its original context. Within the installation, the carefully positioned photographs, deep, red lighting and stark geometry create a richly suggestive environment; taken in isolation, the music somehow deflates. It’s pretty, sad and slightly inconsequential. The Liverpool retrospective offers another chance to experience the work as it was originally conceived, alongside a few more ‘greatest hits’. And there’s also a new piece created especially for the exhibition – *National Portrait (The Last Transmission)*, a response to the demise of the UK’s analogue television signal, which is switched off in the North West the week before the show opens. Asked what it’s all about, Schaefer is momentarily nonplussed. “How can I start?” he ponders. “Firstly, I’m mournful about the fact that they’re turning off analogue televisions. I’ve always watched 5" black and white TVs, I have them in every room in the house, and I love the fact that it doesn’t matter whether it’s good reception or not – you still get content. Analogue technology has tolerance, while digital is binary, either on or off.

“I love the fact that these transmissions have been out there since they started in 1938,” he continues. “And they’re going to kill it, not for any kind of cultural reason, but just because you can put eight digital

channels in the space of one analogue channel. But I feel strongly that less is more and that limitation brings creativity. I’m annoyed about it all, but I want to try and think positively. So, let’s celebrate that first generation of televisual culture, which is now dying – let’s record it.”

Using an array of digital recorders, the piece captures all the audio from the final 24 hours of analogue broadcasting by the five main terrestrial channels. Edited into short chunks fading to silence, they play back randomly through blank-screened television sets. “I don’t know in advance what’s going to happen on that day, so the whole thing is a way to let serendipity happen, really.” And this, he hopes, will end up being more than just an elaborate game of Exquisite Corpse. “What does it mean?” he asks. “What have we got here? Well, I’ve got a day in the life of Britain, as presented by us about us at that moment in time, so let’s not call it *Last Transmission* or anything like that – let’s call it *National Portrait*.”

Given that Schaefer’s work increasingly addresses such universal themes, it’s not altogether surprising he received the biggest commission of his career in 2009 – for a permanent sound art installation that will form part of a new public park being built in the centre of Bradford. His submission, which will combine home recordings made all over the world by the relatives of children at school in the city and meditative drone pieces designed, like Indian ragas, for morning and evening, will interact with a flexible system of fountains and shifting pools of water to produce “something that’s pleasurable to be in, without being Jean Michel Jarre”. It’s scheduled to open in 2012.

Despite his increasing stature, Schaefer remains wedded to his singular working environment – a shed at the far end of his garden. And of all the projects discussed, he’s most enthusiastic about his unlikely new status as a family entertainer. His latest creation, *Lucky Dip Disco*, dispels any lingering suspicions of preciousness. “I always wanted to make dance music, so becoming a DJ has been a genius move for me.” Having acquired several collections from retired pub DJs, Schaefer “filtered out the rubbish” and ended up with “about 200 of the finest dance 7”s ever made”. Then it’s up to the audience. “What I do is turn the box around,” he explains, “so that everyone in the room can choose the music – get rid of the ego, share the ego and make it a party.”

The day after we meet, Schaefer sends me an email, elaborating: “The main impetus was to hold child and parent dance parties for all the toddlers around here, and to get the parents dancing with the kids – it’s one of life’s vital joys. I just wanted to give them a formative experience of real dance music, as opposed to the synth based children’s shit that is peddled to us now. I love the contrast between this and my serious ‘composer of the year’ reputation: you can’t pin me down!”

“The most stressful gig I have ever done, I think, was a third birthday party in a multi-million pound house for a mum friend,” he concludes. “Having an eager audience of 15 three year olds in a massive kitchen was quite daunting, but we ended up doing a conga around the house with them all tailing me. And I have to say – I was in heaven.” □ Janek Schaefer’s Sound Art retrospective runs at Liverpool Bluecoat Gallery until 17 January. audioh.com