

Anti-Pygmalion

On the art of sculptor Ulrich Rückriem
and composer Eva-Maria Houben

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There are fundamental experiences whose logic crosses the boundaries between the arts; some are expressed in classical topoi, others waited until the 20th century to show up. They all now figure as chances and challenges in the wide range of possibilities faced by any contemporary artist. This essay will first take a look at the fundamental experiences expressed in the myth of Pygmalion, and then at how the logic of this myth turned upside down in fundamental experiences made by artists in the 20th and 21st centuries, especially by German sculptor Ulrich Rückriem (*1938) and by his compatriot, composer Eva-Maria Houben (*1955).

I. Pygmalion, or: “Art, to such a high degree, was hidden by his art”

As told by Ovid, the myth of Pygmalion has shrill and ugly sexist connotations. Pygmalion desires women, but he has remained a bachelor since he also despises them. We are told that he has seen the Propoetides, women who refused to acknowledge the divinity of Venus, and who, as a divine punishment, lost any sense of shame. Yet Pygmalion’s misogyny extends beyond this special bad example; he has remained a bachelor since he is, all in general, “offended by the very many failings that nature gave the female mind (*offensus vitiis, quae plurima menti femineae natura dedit*)” (Metamorphoses X, 244sq.). Looking for a male companion does not seem an option for him, either.

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This situation forces Pygmalion's sculptural abilities and his unfulfilled erotic desire to converge. He carves the statue of a woman that seems to lack all of the abovementioned failings. Despite consisting of ivory, and despite expressing a perfection which cannot be found in real women, the statue is so perfectly crafted that it seems to deny being a work of art. Art seems to transcend both nature and itself towards a higher kind of nature: "Art, to such a high degree, is hidden by his art (*ars adeo latet arte sua*)" (ibid., 252). This is the first and only woman that Pygmalion falls in love with; and, according to Ovid, Venus herself is on his side. When he prays to the goddess for a wife like the statue, she miraculously awakens the statue itself to life. One might ask: What if Pygmalion's creature, even if awakened to life, does not love him in return, maybe because she has discerned some serious failings that nature gave to his male mind? – But in the patriarchal set of mind which is at work here, and which even imagines Venus herself as its own partisan, this possibility is just unthinkable. Pygmalion's intentions and abilities are not put into question anyhow; such that the ideal matter for his sculpture, ivory, perfectly yields to his will, and to his will alone – a quality inherited by the outcome of its forming, a virgin that will yield to his will, and to his will alone. Female perfection, if it can be conceived of in such a frame at all, necessarily includes being perfectly at a man's disposal.

So far, so sexist. But there is more to Pygmalion's creative work than perfect rulership over a material, or over female human beings reduced to such material. Even the production of a merely perfectly naturalistic statue requires, if not true creativity, enormous skill and work. It takes a virtuoso's self-transcendence. Transcendence in the proper sense is definitely at work where mere naturalism is overcome, and even more surely, where mere artistic convention is overcome as well. Pygmalion's creative work is based on technical skill, but inspired by an idea that allows him to overcome mere naturalism as well as mere artistic convention – motivated and oriented by something that reaches beyond what merely is. This need not be a supposedly ideal woman; and hence there is a core of Pygmalion's myth that can be stripped of its sexist connotations. Even in Pygmalion's creation of his ideal woman, there is a moment not of rulership, but of ecstatic devotion to an idea

whose details he himself will not completely know until the work is done. This is why the work has a capacity to surprise him, to overwhelm him, to make him love it. Any work of art has such a life of its own, which transcends what the artist himself can overlook, reflect, plan, control and rule. This is obviously true when one thinks of a work's reception; but this already starts with the artist's own reception of his work. It is a truth about artistic creation independent both of the artist's gender and of his or her or their concrete idea.

Over and above its sexist connotations, this truth can also be stripped of its naturalistic connotations, since one of the mere artistic conventions that can be overcome in the creative process is naturalism itself. If so, art will be hidden by art in another sense: It will renounce the virtuosic imitation skills and seek to give expression to something ideal and/or phenomenal exactly by not aiming at a realistic imitation of nature. Nature may still remain the subject matter, but now as in itself something ideal and/or phenomenal. This is the case, for example, when Constantin Brâncuși seeks to sculpturally express the essence of a bird's flight. What Brâncuși still shares with Pygmalion: He does not know how exactly that ideal thing he sets about representing in a sculpture, in short: how exactly the sculpture will look like before he gets to work it out. The result can be more or less convincing. If it is convincing, it can surprise him, overwhelm him, make him fall in love with it.

II. Rückriem, or: "Come as you are"

In 1968, 29-year-old German sculptor Ulrich Rückriem was already long used to being able to make out of stone whatever he wanted.¹ But not only did he never try to sculpt his ideal woman, but in that very year when he started having exhibitions of his art, he made a striking experience that would push him as far away from Pygmalion as possible:

¹ "Im Grunde genommen konnte ich aus Stein alles machen, was ich wollte" (from the West German Radio interview "Erlebte Geschichten: Ulrich Rückriem", published online on June 26, 2005, source: <https://www1.wdr.de/radio/wdr5/sendungen/erlebtegeschichten/rueckriemsulrichs102.html>, accessed on March 6, 2025, here 5:29-5:32).

One day I made a command for five stones, smaller ones, in order to make heads out of them or whatever; and they came, as if due to lack of space, they stood all together as one stone, split into five parts. So I saw a stone which was one, but split into five parts, and reassembled, as if to save space. And that was such an astonishing experience, that I [said]: But this is amazing, yeah! I've never before ... this is impossible! This is a key experience!¹

Rückriem traced back his find to the quarry it originated from:

They take these stones, break them out of the friable rock (that's how it's called), which is a formation that is already quite strongly structured in itself ... there are rhomboid shapes, trapezoidal, rectangular, square ones, all of them very strong forms, given by nature. And at that moment, actually, I liked so much to see them, just as they are, that I hardly did anything about them. I had them taken out, and then I continued splitting them, in order then to reassemble them to their original shape.²

Pygmalion and his many sculptural successors used to be surprised, to be overwhelmed and fall in love with what they had shaped out of their material. Rückriem, on the contrary, made this experience with his material itself, and with the shapes it already had before any sculptor put his hands to it. Hence, he will only act about it in order then to ostentatiously reverse, renounce the action – he will split the stone in order just to reassemble it. Rückriem in the quarry resembles a Pygmalion who says to any woman: "Come as you are, since

¹ "Dann habe ich mal einmal fünf Steine bestellt, kleinere, um vielleicht, um Köpfe zu machen oder irgendetwas; und die kamen, wie aus Platzmangel standen die alle zusammen, die kamen als ein Stein, und waren in fünf Teile gespalten. Und dann habe ich 'nen Stein gesehen, der einer war, aber in fünf Teile gespalten und wieder zusammengesetzt war, wie um Platz zu sparen. Und das war so ein unwahrscheinliches Erlebnis, dass ich [sagte]: Das ist ja phantastisch, ja! So was hab ich ja ... das gibt es doch gar nicht! Das ist ein Schlüsselerlebnis!" (Erlebte Geschichten, 10:54-11:29).

² "Die haben die, holen diese Steine, brechen die aus dem Gebräch (heißt das), das sind also eine Formation, die sehr stark gegliedert ist schon von sich aus, und du kannst also ... die, das sind zum Teil Rautenformen oder Trapezformen oder rechteckige oder quadratische, also alles, also von der Natur gegebene, sehr starke Formen. Und dann habe ich die eigentlich, in dem Moment dann, wirklich so gerne gesehen, so wie sie sind, dass ich fast nichts mehr dran gemacht hab. Ich hab die rausholen lassen und hab die dann weiter gespalten, um sie dann wieder zur ursprünglichen Form wieder zusammenzufügen" (Erlebte Geschichten, 11:52-12:30).

you all are perfect! Any change about you would diminish your perfection. If I ever sculpted my supposedly ideal woman, I would only do it for changing her – thanks to my superior craft and skills – until she looked like any one of you.” And once again in yet another sense, art, to an extreme degree, will be hidden by the sculptor’s art (*ars adeo latet arte sua*). It will be vulnerable to the standard reproach against ‘modern’ art: “But anyone could do that!” – Yet, even if this is true, it matters when it is not anyone who does it, and it matters when and where. In the course of time, many people may have had intuitions similar to Rückriem’s in 1968. But they were not as lucky as he was. He had it in a situation when the world of art was welcoming towards it. Rückriem was not alone; Venus was on his side.

The 19th century saw both the triumph and the downfall of naturalism in ‘Western’ art; yet for a long time, it would remain unquestioned that art was meant to represent something, however exactly one would conceive of it. When this very idea was finally put into question, so could the traditional relation of an artist towards his or her material, and the meaning of art as such. An aesthetics as influential after World War II as Theodor W. Adorno’s still demands from the arts – in this case, from the art of music – “to make itself the – however tragical – image of good life”.¹ But already in the 19th century, radical Protestant thinkers had forged some strong iconoclastic ideas which would come forth with a vengeance as soon as art would come to radically criticize itself. In Søren Kierkegaard’s “Sickness unto Death”, we read: “From a Christian point of view, despite all aesthetics, each poet’s existence is sin – the sin of poetizing instead of being, of relating to the good and true via imagination instead of being it, that is, of striving existentially for being it.”² If the artist as such merely creates an image

¹ In the German original of his “Philosophy of New Music”: “sich zum sei es auch tragischen Bild richtigen Lebens zu machen” (T. W. Adorno, *Philosophie der Neuen Musik*, in: Id., *Gesammelte Schriften XII*, ed. R. Tiedemann, Frankfurt 1975, p. 166).

² “Christelig betraget er (trods al Æsthetik) enhver Digter-Existents Synd, den Synd: at digte istedetfor at være, at forholde sig til det Gode og Sande gennem Phantasi istedetfor at være det, det er, eksistentielt stræbe at være det” (S. Kierkegaard, *Sygdommen til Døden. En christelig psykologisk Udvikling til Opbyggelse og Opvækelse af Anti-Climacus*, in: Id., *Skrifter XI*, ed. Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret, Copenhagen 2006, pp. 113-242, here p. 191).

of good life, he misses the opportunity of trying to lead a good life; and he only has one life for doing so. In New England, transcendentalists pushed in a similar direction, yet it would last until the 1950s and -60s for their thinking to triumph in the work and influence of John Cage. A radical optimism about the fundamental goodness of mankind, the belief that any individual human being, as long as he or she is not misled by wrong education, will be able of the best possible self-discipline and to find God in everything, lays the groundwork for a radical anarchism that rejects all kinds of institutions. For the salvation of the human soul, or however one may conceive of a good life, it does not take institutions like the state, the church, or like art as an image of good life. If there is any point to art, it is to allow one, in all freedom – including the freedom of one's own likes and dislikes –, to perceive what there is. In 1974, Cage said in an interview:

I think perhaps my own best piece, at least the one I like most, is the silent piece ["4'33'", 1952]. It has three movements and in all of the movements there are no sounds. I wanted my work to be free of my own likes and dislikes, because I think music should be free of the feelings and ideas of the composer. I have felt and hoped to have led other people to feel that the sounds of their environment constitute a music which is more interesting than the music which they would hear if they went into a concert hall.¹

Cage's "4'33'" cuts a piece of time in parts and reassembles it in silence, just as Rückriem does with a piece of stone. Cage composes a piece of music, he creates a work of art, only to ostentatiously reverse, renounce it – *not* to compose a piece of music, *not* to create a work of art, but to show: What is already there is not in need of any art; it is already perfectly beautiful, as long as it is perceived in freedom. *Ars adeo latet arte sua*. Maybe more than any other, Cage's art thereby makes itself vulnerable to the standard reproach against 'modern' art: "But anyone could do that!" – It is true, anyone can do just nothing; and, at least according to Cage's beliefs (though it does not go by itself that they are true, to say the least): Anyone can just perceive in freedom what there is. In any case, it was not anyone who did just nothing, but it was John Cage, and he did so in Darmstadt and in New York City in the

¹ R. Kostelanetz (ed.), *Conversing with Cage*, New York City 1988, p. 70.

1950s and -60s, and this left a lasting mark on the world of music and the other arts.

Of course, Cage's stance is only one, though very prominent, of many, and for being so successful, Cage in turn needed already having Venus on his side. There were at the same time several strong tendencies in 'Western' art for minimalistically reducing itself to some kind of essence, to the point of abolishing itself for various reasons, as in color field painting, hard edge, and pop art. For example, the pop-inspired art of Rückriem's colleague Charlotte Posenenske first loved to hide itself by making its works look and be produced like industrial objects, from which they were distinguished only by their non-utility: "They become less and less recognizable as 'works of art'. The objects are supposed to have the objective character of industrial products. They shall not represent anything else than what they are. The traditional classification of the arts does no longer exist. The artist of the future would have to work with a team of specialists in a development laboratory."¹ Anyway, in the same year 1968 when Rückriem made his key experience, Posenenske decided not to be one of those strangely technocratic-yet-non-utilitarian artists of the future, but to give up her artistic activity completely.

Rückriem's stance is as far removed from Posenenske's as it is from Pygmalion's. His sculptures do not mimic industrial products in any way and revel in an obvious non-utility that could hardly be any more genuinely artistic. Very many of them can be found in and around museums or other public spaces in Germany, especially in the "old states". Rückriem is also far from renouncing his likes and dislikes if it comes to the placing of his works: "If I only take a stone, and I could leave it as well where it is, yes? But if I do take it out, then I really have to offer it a good place where it can live. [...] 50 percent of the work is the place. [...] If I don't see it there already as if it had been there forever, yes? then it becomes agonizing for me, then it will not be

¹ "Sie werden immer weniger erkennbar als 'Kunstwerke'. Die Gegenstände sollen den objektiven Charakter von Industrieprodukten haben. Sie sollen nichts anderes vorstellen als sie sind. Die bisherige Einteilung der Künste existiert nicht mehr. Der Künstler der Zukunft müsste mit einem Team von Spezialisten in einem Entwicklungslaboratorium arbeiten" (Art International 12 [1968], p. 50).

right.”¹ But however well a work of Rückriem’s may be placed, it will always stand out provocatively in at least two senses: firstly, by its obvious artistic non-utility in a public context dominated by all possible kinds of practical purposes, and secondly, paradoxically, by its high degree of ostentatious artlessness. Rückriem’s works provoke the question what they are and what they mean, and hence they also provoke comparison with what they remind of. Many of them remind of archaic altars – for example, “Granit (Normandie), gespalten, geschnitten”, that is: “Granite (Normandy), split, cut”, from 1985, next to Berlin’s Neue Nationalgalerie, a huge cube, cut symmetrically into a broad middle part with two narrower outer ones, all on a common base – an archaic triptych with predella, or a sculpture frozen halfway during its development into an altarpiece.²



Fig. 1: U. Rückriem, “Granit (Normandie), gespalten, geschnitten”, in English: “Granite (Normandy), split, cut” (1985, next to Berlin’s Neue Nationalgalerie). – Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://de.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Ulrich_R%C3%BCckriem_Granit_gespalten_1985.jpg, accessed on March 11, 2025).

¹ “Wenn ich also nur ‘nen Stein nehme, und ich kann ihn da auch lassen, wo er ist, ja? Aber wenn ich ihn schon rausnehme, dann muss ich ihm wirklich einen guten Platz anbieten, wo er leben kann. [...] 50 Prozent der Arbeit ist der Ort. [...] Wenn ich die nicht da schon sehe, als wenn sie da ewig gewesen wäre, ja? dann wird sie für mich qualvoll, dann wird es nicht richtig sein” (Erlebte Geschichten, 12:47-13:42).

² It deserves mention that Rückriem thus comes close to Brâncuși again, if one thinks of the “Kiss” (1907-1908) in which Brâncuși “achieved an equilibrium between two recognizable bodies and the integrity of the stone block from which the sculpture was hewn (ein Gleichgewicht zwischen erkennbaren Körpern und der Integrität des Steinblocks, aus dem die Skulptur gehauen wurde, erreichte)” (D. C. Probst, *Der Klang Brâncuși – Präsentation des Projektes*, in: V. Dinescu, M. Heinemann & R. Reale [eds.], *Komponistinnen aus Rumänien*, Oldenburg 2025, pp. 127-154, here p. 131). One may also think of “The Sleep” (1908) where the human face only partially emerges from the stone.

These sculptures may even be more fit to serve as altars than our usual ones, at least according to the Lord's voice in the Book of Exodus: "if thou make Me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stones; for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast profaned it" (Ex 20:25). Apart from a quietist sympathy with Taoism, reminiscent of Cage's affinity for Zen Buddhism, Rückriem is not a specifically religious person.¹ Anyway, the semantic gravitation of many of his works towards traditions of altar building proved to be so strong that in 2014, he would design the new main altar for the Roman Catholic cathedral of Hildesheim.



Fig. 2: U. Rückriem, Gebhartser Granit (Granite from Gebharts, 1988, next to the Bibliothek Günther Förg in Weidingen, Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany). Source: https://www.kunst-in-weidingen.de/application/files/thumbnails/detail_xl_2x/1815/5722/1934/Ulrich_Ruckriem_installation_view_in_Weidingen_2017_photo_def_image_01_sRGB.jpg, accessed on March 11, 2025.

Fig. 3: U. Rückriem, Main altar of Hildesheim Cathedral (2014). Source: https://assets-raphael.max-e.info/damfiles/article/kunstinfo/tipps/kunstorte/rueckriemaltar_hildesheim/DSC_5097---klein-Kopie_200-e37f27b457fd2d237ae62dd78b1f44f7.jpg, accessed on March 11, 2025.

III. Houben, or: "the noise that the king of instruments makes in the middle of the night, while the world slumbers"

The 1960s and -70s saw the triumph and the downfall of the radical avantgarde, including that inspired by John Cage. On both sides of the Atlantic, it widely succumbed to various forms of postmodernism

¹ Cf. *Erlebte Geschichten*, 21:57-22:46.

and neoconservatism. Whatever one may think of this, at least it freed the arts from modernist dogma, in particular from the omnipresent urge somehow to abolish themselves. And even if the radical avantgarde no longer was the dominant mainstream, it was far from being dead. For example, in 1992, the year Cage died, composers Antoine Beuger (from the Netherlands) and Burkhard Schlothauer (from Germany) formed an international group of artists in Europe and the United States, called “Wandelweiser”. This German name is as ambiguous as it is suggestive, since “Wandel” can mean “change” as well as “walk”, and “Weiser” can mean “wise man” as well as “signpost”. On the one hand, its ambiguity fits well the fact that there is no common creed or manifesto to this group; on the other hand, what it suggests fits equally well a common spirit that may be circumscribed like this: They share a strong ethos of attentiveness; they do not make *musique d’ameublement* for being listened to while doing something else. An ethos of attentiveness demands for openness, concentration and endurance – virtues that may help us bring about some kind of existential change (*Wandel*) to the better. If not, music will at least thus “make itself the – however tragic – image of good life”, as Adorno would have it. This is not far away in spirit from Luigi Nono’s “Prometeo”, the “tragedy of listening” which aims at discerning the as yet almost inaudible sounds of the utopian future. In any case, like the later Nono, the composers of the Wandelweiser group – as Alex Ross put it in his “New Yorker” article – “have an interest in slow music, quiet music, spare music, fragile music”.¹ They tend towards minimalism, even ultra-minimalism: They focus on the seemingly simple and unspectacular, seeking to allow its true complexity and wonder to appear. Hence, they make themselves also vulnerable to the reproach: “But anyone could do that!” – *Ars adeo latet arte sua*.

A piece for solo clarinet, called “ein klang und eine stille (a sound and a silence)”, written in 1998 by Wandelweiser member Manfred Werder for another prominent member of the group, Jürg Frey, may serve as a rather straightforward example. The score – if one may call it

¹ A. Ross, The Composers of Quiet, in: The New Yorker (August 29, 2016, source: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/09/05/silence-overtakes-sound-for-the-wandelweiser-collective>, accessed on March 9, 2025).

so – does not contain one single note, but several more ethical than musical indications:

the interpreter plays one sound, one length of breath.
the beginning and the end of the sound are clear and direct.
the following silence lasts somewhat longer than the sound.
for itself, clear and matter-of-fact. simple.¹

Such a conception of music is indeed of kindred spirit not only to the later work of Nono, but also to zen meditation, and to Cage's zen-inspired conception of art as a practice that allows one to perceive in all freedom what there is. Yet it does not endorse its more specific ideological implications, such as Cage's radical optimism, which entails his anarchism, his rejection of any institution, including the state, the church, and art; his corresponding political quietism would scandalize Nono in particular. The rather general and summary appreciation of Cage's work by the artists of the Wandelweiser group also allows them not to feel obliged to free themselves of their likes and dislikes, hence to strip art of the criterion of taste. But even so, a culture of attentiveness may free us from too narrow conceptions of good taste, and allow us to acquire "happy new ears", as Cage would have it.

Minimalism works best when its context has maximum complexity, so that very little needs to happen if one is to activate a complex and strong network of meaning. Among all of the Wandelweiser artists, this may apply especially to Eva-Maria Houben. When she joined the group in the year 2000, she was already a brilliant and prolific organist and musicologist. For example, her habilitation thesis from 1990, "Die Aufhebung der Zeit. Zur Utopie unbegrenzter Gegenwart in der Musik des 20. Jahrhunderts (The Suspension of Time. On the Utopian Idea of Infinite Presence in the Music of the 20th Century)", is a book as maximalist in any sense as one could wish for. She also had composed many works, but retracted all of them when the example of Antoine Beuger encouraged her to a radical, ultra-minimalist

¹ "die interpretin/der interpret spielt einen klang, eine atemlänge. / anfang und ende des klanges sind klar und direkt. / die nachfolgende stille dauert einwenig länger als der klang. / für sich, klar und sachlich. einfach" (M. Werder, ein klang und eine stille. für klarinette, Haan 2001).

approach. One of the first works she composed after joining the Wandelweiser group is an organ piece called “dazwischen”: “in between”. Its score – like Werder’s quoted above – does not contain one single note, and it reads as follows:

very soft.

a very low sound: a drone.

after a while: a very high stream of air – more air than sound.

the whistling stays.

after a while off and on a sound appears between these sounds – mostly with a pitch near c^1 , very seldom near the low drone or near the high whistling.

these sounds appear to disappear.

after a long time, after the last sound between, low drone and high whistling continue for a while – and end simultaneously.¹

The drone is very low, the high sounds are more air than sound, and all of the other sounds appear only to disappear immediately – indeed, this is “slow music, quiet music, spare music, fragile music”, as Alex Ross would have it. Concerning the title of the piece, Ross quotes the composer: “Music may exist ‘between’: between appearance and disappearance, between sound and silence, as something ‘nearly nothing.’” Houben would not make a dogma out of this, as if loud sounds *per se* did not deserve of our attention and attentiveness. For example, a later organ work of hers, “abhanden. méditations sur l’orgue 13” from 2023, based on the harmonic series, starts quietly and humbly, but with a continuous crescendo, finally to ring out monumentally. Yet in “dazwischen”, the brilliant and prolific organist openly declared her love to the instrument as it sounds beyond everything that is usually considered beautiful and spectacular about it. As Ulrich Rückriem, the sculptural Anti-Pygmalion, approached his material, the stone, with the attitude: “Come as you are, since you are already perfectly beautiful!”, now Houben approached her instrument, the organ, attentive to – quoting Ross again – “the noise that the king of instruments makes in the middle of the night, while the world slumbers.” She focused on the seemingly simple and unspectacular, seeking to allow its true complexity and wonder to appear. Houben pursued this path with “breath” in 2018,

¹ E.-M. Houben, *dazwischen. für orgel / for organ*, Haan 2000. All of Houben’s scores are freely accessible on the Wandelweiser website:

<https://www.wandelweiser.de/houbenscores/> (accessed on March 10, 2025).

her famous meditation on the ways of air passing quietly through an organ.¹ Many of these ways resemble soft industrial noises – for example, those of air conditioners or heating systems –, which might even have delighted Charlotte Posenenske.

However Houben minimalizes her means, the maximum complexity of her erudition and imagination will keep her approach significant and flexible. There are works of hers which resemble fluxus-inspired happenings, or socio-musical experiments; there are others, like her organ mass for the weekdays “year by year” from 2022, which are fully noted and seem closer in spirit to pre-Baroque masters than to Cage. In this respect, Houben resembles Kazimir Malevich – that is, his artistic versatility from the black square to his quasi-Renaissance-style self-portrait – more than Rückriem.

Like the other Wandelweiser members, Houben has a strong ethos of attentiveness, sharing this ethos with composers like Cage and Nono, yet without endorsing ideological stances such as Cage’s transcendentalist quietism or Nono’s grimly radical *Salonkommunismus*. It deserves of particular praise that she renounces any esoteric “wisdom allure” and what normally comes with it, especially an alleged aloofness concerning the ethical and the political, for the sake of preserving one’s “peace of mind” at any cost. Any mind that is truly attentive to what there is cannot be very peaceful; it will see too many horrors. In 2024, Houben stated in an interview:

People keep telling me: No, your music is not esoteric, you can’t listen to it while cleaning vegetables and so on, it really keeps you in thrall. It is not esoteric and it also is not meditative, these words do not apply. I also don’t want to calm down. I don’t want to relax. I want to be able to get upset. [...] We carry the whole burden of the past with us. And Walter Benjamin took up Paul Klee’s image of the angel of history walking backwards against the storm, seeing an army of devastation. And I tried to do this in the book [“Musical Practice as a Form of Life. Finding Meaning and Experiencing Reality

¹ This work would make the English blogger Bradford Bailey wonder how a member of a group that sympathizes with somebody as ideologically questionable as John Cage could produce something as beautiful as this; cf. <https://blogthehum.com/2018/02/26/on-the-problems-with-the-wandelweiser-group-and-the-virtues-of-eva-maria-houbens-breath-for-organ-out-via-second-editions/> (accessed on March 10, 2025).

in Making Music”, Bielefeld 2018], to say: What is the point, why music in the face of ...?, and this “in the face of ...” always means looking at the devastation, and it is not serenity, but I am upset about the devastation, about the wars, about all that, and I do not want to retreat into my own practice like: “I am going to sit down at the piano now”, but I want to carry on doing what I am doing *facing* all of this, and to endure what has happened, and through music, and through the social element, and also through the hope for change (*Wandel*), endure what has happened, and be able to live with what has happened. And music can help with that, by creating situations together in which we say: Yes, this is the kind of situation we would like to have! – so that this radiates into our everyday lives, from the sub-universe of music.¹

As pointed out above concerning the Wandelweiser group in general: Houben’s ethos of attentiveness demands for openness, concentration and endurance – virtues that may help us bring about some kind of existential change (“Wandel”) to the better. And if not,

¹ “Ich habe oft Stimmen gehört: Nee, Ihre Musik ist aber nicht esoterisch, da kann man jetzt nicht bei Gemüse putzen und so, man ... es nimmt einen schon in den Bann. Es ist nicht esoterisch und auch nicht meditativ, diese Worte treffen nicht. Ich möchte mich auch nicht beruhigen. Ich möchte nicht gelassen sein. Ich möchte mich aufregen können. [...] Die ganze Last der Vergangenheit schleppen wir mit uns rum. Und Walter Benjamin hat das Bild von Paul Klee aufgegriffen, der Engel der Geschichte geht rückwärts gegen den Sturm und sieht ein Heer von Verwüstung. Und ich hab versucht, in dem Buch [“Musikalische Praxis als Lebensform. Sinnfindung und Wirklichkeitserfahrung beim Musizieren”, Bielefeld 2018] zu sagen: Wozu, warum Musik angesichts ...?, und dieses ‘angesichts ...’ ist immer ein Kucken auf die Verwüstung, und es ist keine Gelassenheit, sondern ich bin aufgeregt über die Verwüstungen, über die Kriege, über das, und ich möchte mich auch nicht zurückziehen in mein eigenes Tun: ‘Ich setze mich jetzt ans Klavier’, sondern ich möchte mit dem Tun *angesichts* dessen weitermachen und das Geschehene aushalten, und durch die Musik, und durch das soziale Element, und auch durch die Hoffnung auf Wandel, das Geschehene aushalten, und mit dem Geschehenen leben können. Und dazu kann Musik helfen, indem wir gemeinsam Situationen schaffen, in denen wir sagen: Ja, solche Situationen, die möchten wir haben! – dass das ausstrahlt in unser Alltagsleben, aus dem Subuniversum der Musik heraus” (from the Deutschlandfunk Kultur radio portrait “Komponistin Eva-Maria Houben. Sinnfindung und Wirklichkeitserfahrung (Composer Eva-Maria Houben. Finding Meaning and Experiencing Reality)” by Hubert Steins, published online on October 29, 2024, source: <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/sinnfindung-und-wirklichkeitserfahrung-portraet-eva-maria-houben-dlf-kultur-244e2a46-100.html>, accessed on March 10, 2025, here 48:13-50:13).

music will at least thus “make itself the – however tragical – image of good life”, as Adorno would have it; and the artists will, however, not fall under Kierkegaard’s verdict of sin, for they will have created an image of good life by an attempt to lead one.

Houben’s spiritual openness includes one for other cultures, especially – which, of course, also reminds of Cage – for the Japanese. There is, for example, a work cycle called “haiku” (2003-2019); her piano piece “kare-san-sui” (2019) is named after the Japanese rock gardens; and Japanese dancer Sanae Kagaya one day would discover how well Houben’s music goes together with her own art, the *butoh* dance. There are also other works, such as “gesang XI (song XI)” (2018) from the cycle “gesänge des tages und der nacht (songs of the day and night)” (2016-2018), which bears no Japanese title, but is very close in spirit to the traditional imperial court music called *gagaku*.

Houben’s contact with Romanian culture started by collaborating and becoming friends with the two most prominent expatriate Romanian composers in Germany, Violeta Dinescu and Corneliu Dan Georgescu. This began in the 1990s – otherwise one could wonder why Georgescu is not yet mentioned in Houben’s study on an idea as important to his work as the suspension of time. It may not be a coincidence that Houben’s participation in Bucharest’s *Săptămâna Internațională a Muzicii Noi* (2010) occurred when the two arguably most Cage-inspired Romanian artists of our time, Irinel Anghel and Mihaela Vosganian,¹ were artistic directors of this festival.

Over and above this, inside the Wandelweiser group, Houben may be the member with the closest relation to organized Christian religion, and to its traditions of sacred music. From time to time, this shows in titles, like “litanies” (2005), “pie jesu” (2007), “psalm 117” (2008), “stabat mater” (2010), “maria magdalena” (2011), “a-men” (2012), “hildegard-fragmente” (2013), “antiphon” (2017), the abovementioned organ mass “year by year” (2022), “carillon” (2024) or “stillness – laudate dominum” (2024). But it also shows in a work like

¹ Cf. V. Dinescu, M. Heinemann & R. Reale (eds.), *Komponistinnen aus Rumänien (Women Composers from Romania)*, Oldenburg 2025, pp. 86f. and 99ff. (Vosganian), pp. 98f. and 175f. (Anghel).

“incantatio” (2017), whose title, apart from being Latin, only discreetly hints in this direction. It is written “for one”¹ – leaving open if this is supposed to be one player, one singer, or even one group of players or of singers. The score has two pages. There are no indications about tempo or dynamics, only a distinction between rather longer and rather shorter sounds. Page 1 comprises the following five lines:

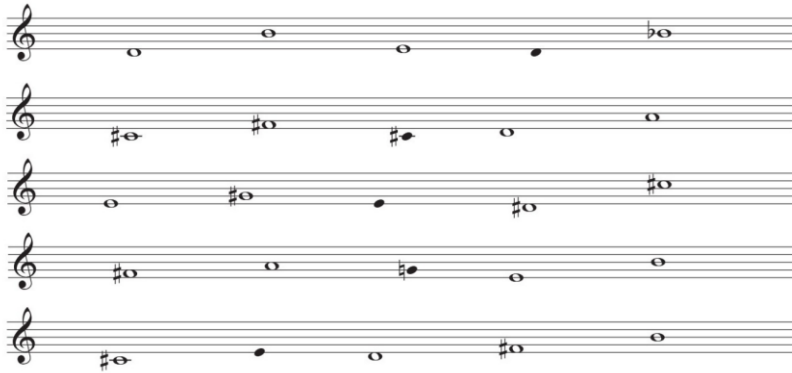


Fig. 4: E.-M. Houben, *incantatio. for one*, Haan 2017, p. 1.

First one might think: This is a Wandelweiser piece, so it may be supposed to be played very slowly and softly. But the composer writes above the score that “after each line the question arises: / stop here? – go to the next line? – go to the other page?” – And this cannot be conveyed if the interpretation is too slow and too soft. At this point, the spiritual drama of this piece starts to unfold; since the music turns out to be a kind of chorale, a musical expression of religious faith, yet a hesitant, uncertain one. The pitch distribution corresponds to this by a floating, uncertain tonality, though with a tendency towards B minor: B, C#, D, E and F# are privileged, G/G# and A/A# (if Bb is taken as enharmonically equivalent to A#) alternate like in the B melodic minor scale, whereas C and F do not occur. Only D# stands out, but this does not challenge the predominance of B; it only gives the general B minor a tilt towards B major.

¹ E.-M. Houben, *incantatio. for one*, Haan 2017.

A surprise comes on page 2. The composer calls it a “trail; a calm, soft and even pulsation”. Its beginning seems to reconfirm the tendency towards B minor with the falling minor third D-B. But in fact, the tendency is lost; the pitch material is fully chromatic. It constitutes a twelve-tone series:

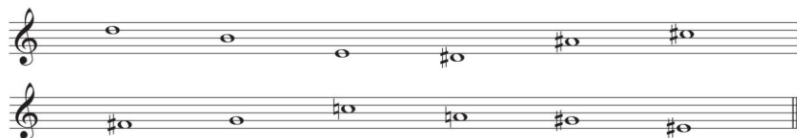


Fig. 5: E.-M. Houben, *incantatio*. for one, Haan 2017, p. 2.

In all of its sparsity, “*incantatio*” contains a drama of belief and doubt with the uncertainty if a chorale, a musical expression of faith, is to be sung (or played) or not. The tonal order with its inequality among the pitches comes to designate a realm of conflict, whereas the atonal, dodecaphonic equality among the pitches designates a realm of peace.¹

Alex Ross made a general point on what has been shown here in particular concerning Houben’s “*incantatio*”: “Wandelweiser’s ghost tonality never achieves stability; it will frustrate those who expect one chord to lead logically to another. The composers enact a kind of double rebellion, both against a mainstream audience that pines for tonality and against an institutionalized avant-garde that spurns it. Through that twin negation, Wandelweiser breaks with the past, and is exerting a powerful influence on music of the new century.” Houben in particular gives Wandelweiser’s ultra-minimalism a horizon of ultra-maximalist dimensions, and thereby maximum significance and flexibility. The registers of her stylistic organ range from the most traditional to the most radical avantgarde approaches – that of the Anti-Pygmalions who found in what already was more beauty, or even perfection, than in what they might create. Thus, by the sparest means, Houben’s music

¹ Young John Cage considered this equalization to be Schönberg’s most important achievement, since he interpreted it as anti-authoritarian: “Schoenberg’s method is analogous to a society in which the emphasis is on the group and the integration of the individual in the group” (J. Cage, *The Future of Music: Credo*, in: Id., *Silence. Lectures and Writings*, Middletown CT 1961, pp. 3-6, here p. 5).

can also make ring out the dialectic which allowed many modernist composers to find century-old techniques more progressive than their contemporary “state of the art”. Her conception of musical practice as a form of life allows even to reconcile Adorno’s demand for art as an image of good life, and Kierkegaard’s or Cage’s criticisms of art thus understood. Her creative horizon keeps an open access to a wide spectrum of possibilities achieved in the course of the history of music and the other arts, without ever endorsing the dogmata they often come with. This virtue of creative openness can also be stripped of any minimalistic connotations. The history of the arts, including the avantgarde, should remain a multifaceted challenge to any future creativity, which can only find its very own character by facing it.

SUMMARY

Thorsten Gubatz

Anti-Pygmalion

This essay first takes a look at one of the fundamental experiences whose logic crosses the boundaries between the arts, as it is expressed in the myth of Pygmalion. Pygmalion is surprised, overwhelmed and falls in love with what he has shaped out of his material. The logic of this myth turns upside down in fundamental experiences made by artists since the 20th century, as by German sculptor Ulrich Rückriem and by his compatriot, composer Eva-Maria Houben. One day in 1968, Rückriem is surprised, overwhelmed and falls in love with his material, the stone, and from then on, he will shape it only so as to ostentatiously undo the shaping. In the year 2000, brilliant and prolific organist and composer Houben joins the ultra-minimalistic Wandelweiser group and retracts all of her previous compositions, searching for the wonder in the apparently most unspectacular sounds not only of her instrument. Yet however Houben minimalizes her means, the maximum complexity of her erudition and imagination keeps her approach significant and flexible. She thereby gives a good example of an artist’s relating to the history of the arts, including the avantgarde, as to a multifaceted challenge and inspiration for one’s own creativity.