

A comprehensive outline of Henning Christiansen's life and work, this essay represents an expanded, edited version of a text that was published on Mark Harwood's blog and then in the online journal *surround*, no. 2, April 2014. Harwood is an Australian publisher, curator, and sound artist based in London who operates Penultimate Press, the primary publisher of Henning Christiansen's music in the twenty-first century. As part of the *Freedom is Around the Corner* performance programming, Harwood is performing a new piece entitled *REALITY IS AROUND THE CORNER*, with Ute Wassermann and Werner Durand, that incorporates rare recordings found in the Henning Christiansen Archive at 55 Walker Street, New York, on October 12, 2018.

This article was originally written for a blog I once ran, as a means dealing with the frustrating lack of information available on the subject, Henning Christiansen. A second, revised version of my article writing was commissioned by the American online journal *surround* in 2014.

I recall looking at countless books on the twentieth-century avant garde, sound art, and experimental music, and not once did the Christiansen's name appear in the index amongst the endless American, British, and Russian surnames that appeared over and over again like little syntactical sheep. Since writing the initial essay I have become friends with Christiansen's widow, Ursula, as well as with their children. I continue to work extensively with the archive that they house, helping to restore, research, and digitize the large web of recordings Christiansen left behind. In so doing, the scope of Christiansen's output has proven itself to be far beyond what I conceived when I instigated my research, giving me a totally new understanding of the man himself and his artistic practice. All of this brings us to the third version of this article, written for a month-long celebration of Christiansen's ideas and output in New York—something that was utterly inconceivable when I first encountered the work of this green-eared man a decade ago.

—Mark Harwood



We were of course very impressed by Cage when we were in Darmstadt, but he has his house and I have mine.

—Henning Christiansen

The music of Henning Christiansen is an unusual proposition. It comes from the twentieth-century avant-garde but does not sit comfortably amongst any of the recognizable patterns within that field. It often incorporates a collage technique but is not strictly *musique concrète*; there are no chance-based experiments, but often within his work there appears what could be considered random events; and while improvisation is certainly at hand, this is not do-or-die free improvisation. It came from (exists within?) the Fluxus paradigm but avoids the common gestures associated with Fluxus works. Christiansen's recorded output can be conservative, radical, mystical, dramatic, organic, beautiful, unsettling, whimsical, random, charming, and hilarious. There is a human behind all this, one who prioritized the logic and chaos of nature over pure theory and the synthetic.

Henning Christiansen was a composer, musician, political activist, father, and artist—one who created an enormous body of work, one of the largest I have encountered. He made a large number of performances over five decades and left behind a labyrinth of recordings, of which only a handful saw the light of release during his lifetime. Christiansen passed away on the 10th of December, 2008, leaving an archive and legacy that would take years to order, quantify, research, and place into the twentieth-century fold into which he worked whilst paradoxically operating at a distant from.

EDUCATION

Henning Christiansen was born in Copenhagen in 1932. He lived in Denmark for most of his life, the majority with his wife and children on the island of Møn. Christiansen studied at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Copenhagen from 1951–54 with clarinet as his major, and again in 1961–63, studying music theory and the history of music and composition. It was in this second stint at the conservatory that the composer and Christiansen's professor Finn Hoffding assisted the development of his musical thinking. "Hoffding was one of the most important (teachers), he was my teacher of musical form. I learned that music is architecture. It's

something you shape in an empty space and then you break it down again.” Composition for him was a minor subject: “It isn’t something you read up upon; composing is something you do—if you know how.”¹

In 1961 the young visual artist Poul Gernes and the art historian Troels Andersen took it upon themselves to shape a concrete reaction to what they saw as the antiquated teachings of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. The Ex-School (*Eks-Skolen*) presented a liberal, non-hierarchical platform for new ways of approaching the study and creation of art. The attraction of such unorthodox schooling was appealing to many in the younger generation, and Christiansen was one of the earliest participants in the experimental practice within these flexible walls. It was here that he met Bjørn Nørgaard. Nørgaard became one of Christiansen’s closest, lifelong friends, colleagues, and collaborators, along with his wife Ursula Reuter Christiansen. Alongside composition Christiansen was extremely active in a variety of other disciplines. He was on the editorial staff of periodicals such as *A + B* (*Arme + Ben = Arms + legs*), made alongside other Ex-School participants such as Allan De Waal, Bjørn Nørgaard, and Erik Hagens. Christiansen had his own publishing house, Panel 13, where he published *A Rose is a Rose*, *Perceptive Constructions*, *Psychological Constructions*, and with Eric Andersen, *3 progressive sonatas for piano*; with Hans-Jørgen Nielsen, *After Zero*; and with Per Kirkeby, *Blue*. Christiansen was one of the founding members of the film collective ABC Cinema, and along with making the majority of music for the experimental films made in this collective he made his own film, *Musik als grün* (1969–1970) starring Lene Adler Petersen, Nørgaard, and Kirkeby.

Whilst embracing the radical initiatives taking form at the Ex-School, Christiansen simultaneously worked at the Det Unge Tonekunstnerselskab, or DUT (The Young Composers Society). He organized concerts of electronic music and performances of contemporary composition. While his work displeased some of the professors, this was an important period for Christiansen’s future. In 1961 DUT hosted an event at the Louisiana Museum, and at the invitation of Christiansen, Nam June Paik did a performance which resulted in a fair degree of outrage; from this point Christiansen and Paik remained lifelong friends. On April 23,

1963, the Study Circle for Contemporary Music, a group within the alumni association of the Academy of Music, organized a Fluxus-type concert at which a variety of new compositions were performed. Christiansen’s contribution to the evening was *3 progressive sonatas for piano*. No one took up the offer to have sex during the last movement, as scored, so a pornographic film was projected onto the ceiling instead. Poul Gernes stood naked to the waist banging the piano with a hammer until the keys flew off. The next day Christiansen was called into the head office where it was mutually agreed that he should find something else to do.

DUT organized the FESTUM FLUXORUM (Fluxus. Music and Anti Music) held in the Nikolaj Church Copenhagen in November 1962. This event included prominent international guests including the artists Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Emmett Williams, and Benjamin Patterson. Encountering those who were leaning towards more open-minded approaches to musical practice along with exposure to overtly exploratory gestures in visual art and performance had a significant impact on his own creative endeavours that followed.

In 1962 I threw it all away. I had played enough. I knew that I did not want to be in an orchestra because it was quite boring for me. It was always the same. Others find it very nice, but I was finished with it.

—Henning Christiansen²

In 1962 and 1963 Christiansen attended the summer courses at Darmstadt, engaging with and exploring the ideas and influence of Stockhausen and Boulez—although Christiansen later boasted that he spent most of his time in the canteen, expressing that the more rewarding ideas were to be found there. Like many of his contemporaries, Christiansen reacted against the modernist techniques, particularly that of serialism, rejecting it as unnecessary complexity that reiterated redundant bourgeois tendencies. He felt a need to break from such dogma.

A hammer without a master can’t be controlled. After all there’s no one to hold it. It’s a highly unpleasant matter.

—Henning Christiansen

¹ Henning Christiansen, quoted in Karin Hindsbo, “Henning Christiansen – Composer of Time,” in Karen Hindsbo, ed., *HENNING CHRISTIANSEN: Composer, Fluxist and out of order* (Højbjerg: Foreningen HC, 2011), 53.

² Francesco Conz, “Interview with Henning Christiansen,” in the present volume.

Le marteau sans maître (*The hammer without a master*) is a serialist composition by French composer Pierre Boulez. First performed in 1955, it sets the surrealist poetry of René Char to music for contralto and six instrumentalists. Whilst Christiansen sidestepped serialism in his own work, *The Hammer without a Master* is a phrase that he appropriated and used throughout his career, as a slogan that appeared in paintings and installations. The phrase could be a metaphor for Christiansen's own endeavors, viewed as an idiosyncratic energy burst undertaking unbridled explorations of his own devising.

In this period Christiansen also wrote a personal letter to Stockhausen criticising his "delusions of grandeur." In 1969 Christiansen wrote an extended reply to Stockhausen's work that was published in *Dansk Musik Tidsskrift* (volume 44, no. 03). It starts off with a quote from the Tao Te Ching: "Therefore the sage travels all day without putting down his heavy load—though there may be spectacles to see, he easily passes them by." The ensuing essay attacks Stockhausen for jumping on the trends of the day and gives some indication of Christiansen's own pattern of thought at this point in time.

For many years Karlheinz Stockhausen has worked thoroughly with constructed music; music that has moved further and further away from the beat of the human pulse. Music to which consideration of mankind's physical and mental potential has become less and less relevant. That this music has been made with the aid of systems, however, tells us nothing about the use of game rules and systems in art. Like all other technical devices, they only acquire their special value and colouring through use. Systematic art may well be "expressive" or build on psychological effect in the recipient. I believe I have demonstrated myself, among other ways with my *Perceptive Constructions*, where the rules of the game indicated by the title do in fact generate a particular effect on the listener.

So, in the early '60s, we have a composer studying the clarinet, studying (with reservation) modern/serial composition along with a concurrent investigation of more radical performance and destructive gesture. The disparate teachings from The Royal Danish Academy of Music, The Young Composers Society, Ex-School,

Darmstadt, and Fluxus all played a part in the development of Christiansen's voice. He met Joseph Beuys in 1964, and the resulting friendship evolved into some of Christiansen's more fully realized initial experiments. All of these strands of teachings surfaced and resurfaced throughout his career. He could be stubborn when he came to the point of turning his back on something he had once invested in. Giving up the clarinet was one such example of this: when he quit clarinet, he never picked it up again. Despite this occasional reactionary stance, elements of many of his learnings reappear throughout his career.

Christiansen's music remains potent to this day: it retains a mysterious charm as it treads the surfaces between music and sound, the nostalgic, the unguarded, the synthetic, and the natural. His artistic trajectory could be seen as a compacted history of twentieth-century music within a single individual. Was it the age he lived through or the colorful circles in which he existed? There is no way to verify the exact path Christiansen took, but one can reason that (like many of the Fluxus composers) it was his compositional background that made his later, more abstract works distinct from other composers' methods of liberating sound.

How and why did one man go from the relatively secure formal experiments of *Perceptive Constructions* to the singular sound mélange of *Den Røde Skov* or *Abschiedssymphonie*? Was Christiansen challenging himself or his audience? Or was it simply a reaction against the various popular threads of experimental music at the time, serialism through to minimalism? Few of Christiansen's works fit comfortably within a particular movement or form, and to come to any conclusion as to how this came to be is difficult. This was a gifted radical determined to forge his own signature in the overcrowded dogma of liberated twentieth-century music/sound.

EARLY WORKS

To Play To-Day (a title borrowed from a text by Gertrude Stein) was composed in 1963–64 but not performed until December 1966, by which time the composer had moved on to more constructivist or minimalist ideas. The score exists in two versions: an English version for the international Fluxus concert and a Danish one for a performance on Radio Denmark. The handwritten English score is dated "Dec. 64." This is a classic piece of instrumental theater

with instructions for the pianist to read aloud parts of text (by Dick Higgins, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Christiansen) and perform various acts, such as counting, ringing an alarm clock, etc. In between the speech parts and actions, short pieces of music (from 5 to 95 seconds in length) complete the composition.

Perceptive Constructions from 1964 was a pivotal point in Christiansen's early output and remains one of his most highly regarded works from this period. His motivations seem to be the unity of popular music's immediate simplicity and the direct nature of modern design at the time. Christiansen achieves his goals with simple rules that govern the musical sequences in ways that can be easily determined by the audience. *Perceptive Constructions* is a work that turns its back on the teachings of Stockhausen and Boulez: sound and silence figure as equal companions, and repetition was embraced as a reaction to serialist dogma. The work plays out like an audio illusion; the use of repeated phrases was a means of enticing the attentive listener to partake in the process with the ability to predict what would occur next, rather than being alienated by the unpredictable nature of serialist music.

The individual parts change through the process of sly repetition and incorporate gaps of silence as a musical device. Silence is used as bridge between the sounds, both to distort what comes prior and navigate what comes next. Christiansen never saw this as a minimalist work and he made a point of clarifying that he was a "Constructivist," referring to the works of this period as "Ny enkelhed" ("New Simplicity").

A collection of these works is gathered on the *Konstruktioner* LP (1982), which includes *Perceptive Constructions*, *Den Rokadiske*, *Und Ein Engel Ging Vorbei*, and *Den Arkadiske*, and features a striking Op Art design by Poul Gernes on its cover. As this is the only extant document of this period in time, it is essential for those wishing to explore the wellspring from which Christiansen's later works arose.

Henning and Poul were both fiercely judgemental. Why was that? Was it that which powered them, a way of creating art? Insatiable energy? Poul used to dash around. Henning just sat there. Both of them had what seems to me a strange desire to make the world a better place. And the incorrigibility of the world gave rise, on their part, to prejudicial fury.

—Per Kirkeby

Complicated compositional devices have never appealed to me. What I find appealing in connection with art represents rather the opposite.

—Henning Christiansen³

The output that stemmed from Christiansen meeting Joseph Beuys proved to be Christiansen's most individual and fruitful work of this period. They met each other in 1964 and first worked together on *Manresa* along with Bjørn Norgaard in 1966, instigating a collaborative relationship of lasting up until Beuys's death in 1986. Christiansen and Beuys shared a common belief in performance as a means of liberating expression for the individual, whilst adorning a political underpin to their activities. Christiansen often provided the soundtrack and performed other roles as well in performances with Beuys; some of their collaborative pieces include *Rastplatz bitte Sauberhalten* (1967), *Eurasienstab—Fluxorum Organum* (1968), *Die Große Grüne Zeitsymphonie* (1980-81), and towards the end of Beuys life, *Friedenskonzert (Freedom Concert)*, performed alongside Nam June Paik. That Christiansen did not receive his dues for their collaborations is an understatement, with art critics of the day failing to recognize that the works were the result of an equal collaboration; one critic even referred to Christiansen as Beuys' "bearded assistant."

Euraniensstab is a five-part organ piece made for the performance *Organum Fluxorum Eurasiensstab 82 min Op 39*, written in 1967 and performed by Christiansen and Beuys on July 2, 1967, in Vienna and on February 9, 1968, in Antwerp. The piece was recorded in a church in Düsseldorf on a "manipulated" tape machine, resulting in tape warble, minor inflections in pitch, etc. The recordings of Christiansen's work for church organ were played throughout the performance (video of this performance online omits the audio). Beuys and Christiansen both liked the idea of the tape machine playing back church organ recordings outside of a church resulting in a secular work. The piece consists of a series of repetitive deep melodic church organ refrains, resulting in a music that is haunting and hypnotic combining an association with church music and a see-saw approach to repetition. The five parts of the work were conceived in tandem with the planned actions and movements of Beuys throughout the performance.

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"a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose on auditive and visual form etc," in *HENNING CHRISTIANSEN: Composer, Fluxist and out of order*, 91.

Christiansen's keyboard works often reference one of his major influences, Erik Satie, in this case his *Messe des pauvres* (*Mass for the Poor*), which in itself was influenced by the Rosicrucian movement, a once worldwide "secret" brotherhood claiming to possess esoteric wisdom regarding ancient times. Of Satie, Christiansen wrote, "In the summer of 1965 I began to sit playing the piano works of the French composer Satie (1866–1925). I was enthusiastic about the (wordless) narrative quality in his musical language. These were blackly humorous tales, human depictions of warmth. For me Satie was a truly nice man, a real human being with all his oddities intact."⁴

Messe des pauvres was quoted explicitly in a later work of Christiansen's built from the original *Euraniestab* recordings, *Op.50: Requiem of Art (Aus "Celtic") Fluxorum Organum II*. Constructed for the Beuys/Christiansen performance of *CELTIC (Kinloch, Rannoch): Schottische Symphonie* at the Edinburgh College of Art at the end of 1970, *Op.50: Requiem of Art (Aus "Celtic") Fluxorum Organum II* is a stunning piece of music/sound/text. Christiansen refers to this piece as "a Requiem for the sixties—remembrances and thoughts that continue from there."⁵ Again, the church organ motif bobs up and down throughout, this time it is overlaid with a variety of everyday sonic situations: a hammer hits an anvil, a plane circles overhead, waves break, a bird twitters, a violin is played in the most unorthodox manner resulting in a sharp repetitive scratching sound, and a human voice sing-moans. German text punctuates the proceedings at one point, spoken with the female voice of Ursula Reuter Christiansen—relaxed yet affirmative. The text consists of quoted fragments of Gustave Flaubert with some of Ursula's own additions revolving around the requiem as a mass for the dead. Despite its somber tone it is not clear whether the piece is about a living or dead person. Like many of Christiansen's works it is difficult to categorize this work. Today we are familiar with a single sine wave as music' noise is a familiar sonic tool often deployed within "popular music"; and to the experimental listener all manner of decayed, destroyed audio has been become accepted. This work carries few familiar tropes: it remains on a singular plane, somewhere between an organ recital, a sonic collage, and a radio play.

4 "BOTH: SATIE IN HIGH SEAS," in *HENNING CHRISTIANSEN: Composer, Fluxist and out of order*, 163.

5 Ibid.

THE 1970s

In 1970 Henning Christiansen and Bjørn Nørgaard were thrust into the Danish national consciousness when a large portion of the general Danish population watched a TV broadcast of a performance piece wherein Nørgaard killed and cut up a horse in protest of the Vietnam War, provoking a national debate. Accompanied by poems read by Lene Adler Petersen and a green violin played by Christiansen, *The Horse Sacrifice* also features the beautiful and fragile *Min Døde Hest* (*Op. 55*), a simple, somber song, unusual when compared to anything else in Christiansen's output to this point.

Throughout the '70s Christiansen primarily made a living by writing film music and creating programs for Danish radio (a financially necessary diversion from his true musical interests). Some of the more successful works in this field are those undertaken as collaborations with friends. The music for Jørgen Leth and Per Kirkeby's film *Dyrehaven, den romantiske skov* (*The Deer Garden, The Romantic Forest*) was described by Allan de Waal as something midway between the Danish national song "Der er et yndigt land" ("There is a lovely country") played backwards and "Skønjomfru luk dit vindue op" ("Fair maiden, throw thy window wide"). Jørgen Leth's 1967 short experimental film *The Perfect Human* (as reworked in Lars Von Trier's *The Five Obstructions*) utilizes some of Christiansen's earlier compositions and is an indication of the tone he used for film works. Other soundtracks include a highly whimsical take on Satie's legacy, *Satie i høj sø* made for Peter Thorsboe's short TV film, *En hyldest til de gamle, eller: Satie i høj sø*, aired in 1974. The soundtrack of Ursula Reuter Christiansen's *The Executioner* (1972) consists of a deeply melancholic romantic aura blended with location recordings and, at one point, the sounds of a group of drunk men digging a grave. It is worth noting the bulk of Christiansen's soundtrack work sways between more traditional, even romantic moods, occasionally referencing traditional Danish song, Erik Satie, Edvard Grieg, etc.

A SHORT SIDE NOTE ON CHRISTIANSEN'S POLITICAL ACTIVITY

During this period, in the '70s, at his home on the island of Møn, Christiansen was actively involved in more collective projects,

including cooperative societies and periodicals. He organized festivals and was an enthusiastic member of the Communist Party. In 1977 he was invited to the Soviet Union where his utopian dream of an ideal state was instantly shattered by what he saw. Christiansen had a strong belief in the “ordinary as dynamo” and expected this to be ultimately realized behind the Iron Curtain. The reality instead was an oppressive exploitation of such a notion, as witnessed in the poor living conditions and suppression of individual thought that Christiansen witnessed, which resulted in his resignation from the Communist Party (to which he never returned). He continued to think politically but embraced a less ideological platform, where ideas would seep into sound via nature. A turning point in his creative output came in the year 1984 when, as a direct reaction to the bleak, concrete world of George Orwell’s dystopian vision, he created a piece that was a deeper reflection on nature. He called it *Green-ear-year*, a signpost to listen to nature. A number of watercolors he made throughout this year all pointed to the act of listening to what is out there.

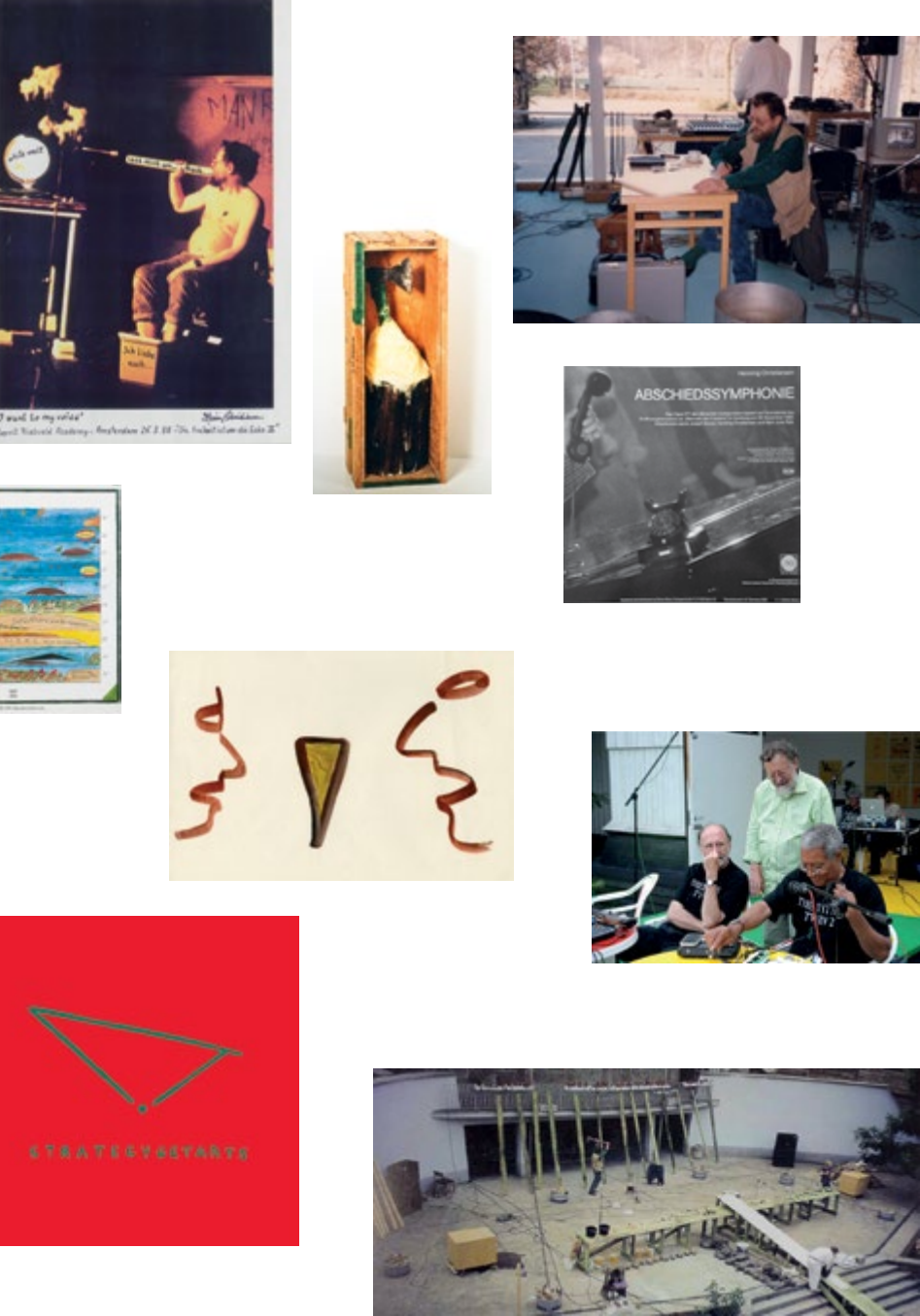
GREEN

Christiansen like to quote the mystic Hildegard von Bingen—“Green is the source of the world”—and shared her view of “green” as the source of all life in the cosmos.

THE 1980s

Following from his explorations of composition, soundtrack work, and the tape machine in its infancy as an instrument unto itself, it is in the '80s that we confront a more permanent, radical shift in Christiansen’s recorded output, resulting in some of his more significant and individualistic works. When I first encountered works like *Den Røde Skov*, *Abschiedssymphonie*, and *Symphony Natura*, I was struck by how unique they were, with their seemingly random conglomerate of natural and unnatural sounds brushing against each other, that then move around in the most unexpected manner. Affected children’s voices, animal sounds, the sound of wind, rattling percussion, and buzzing electronics all suddenly giving way to a beautiful melody that creeps into the mix. Haunting and even





disturbing in parts, these works are a major sonic experience for those that like sound organized in a manner unlike any previously encountered. At first listen, I found it difficult to configure such works into my understanding of experimental music at the time.

Christiansen's adoption of the tape machine is one of the key elements of the works that appeared in the last decades of his life. His approach to the machine is not so dissimilar to those electronic studios that used their facilities to explore sound/*musique concrète*/electroacoustic forms; however, Christiansen's work, no matter how unorthodox it appears, always exudes an aura of wayward tranquility: nature as chaos, music as an honest reproduction of natural systems. The "natural" sounds are the dominant focus of the soundscape; processing and annihilating the source material, meanwhile, is far from the agenda. Christiansen's approach was neither a formal experiment in sound, a la Alvin Lucier, or similar to the destroyed audio coalescing with narrative schemes that had been coming out of the French GRM school. In Christiansen's music lies an approach which is hard to situate amongst others working in the "studio/tape" field. It's a thrilling experience for the listener to hear someone who was truly determined to find a new way to put together this thing we call music.

A sound is a sound. The interval between two sounds is the interval between two sounds. If one sticks to this the music is borne from the world of dream and metaphysics into reality. The music becomes an object that is its own reality.

—Henning Christiansen⁶

Opus 177, Abschiedssymphonie (possibly a reference to Haydn's *Farewell Symphony*), is an unsettling and glorious work constructed from material recorded at the Friedenskonzert, as performed at the Biennale des Friedens, Hamburg, on November 29, 1985. Christiansen then reworked the original recordings, adding a variety of sounds to the mix: water, stones, hammering, and bleating sheep. The concert itself was performed with Nam June Paik and Joseph Beuys, though due to his illness, Beuys made his contribution from his deathbed: there were three pianos onstage, and a telephone was placed on top of the piano; Beuys, who also requested an oxygen tank to placed underneath the piano, called in to the performance.

⁶ "a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose on auditive and visual form etc," in *HENNING CHRISTIANSEN: Composer, Fluxist and out of order*, 91.

A recording of *Abschiedsymphonie* was assembled by Christiansen and Ernst Kretzer, with contributions from Christiansen's first son, Esben Christiansen, along with Lorenzo Mammi and Thomas Stelter. It shifts from the tranquil to the utterly frenzied, often within a single stroke. Non-complementary sounds are layered at random; Paik plays Chopin and other classical phrases on one piano, and also some violin. A microphone is carelessly bumped, before the voice of Beuys via the telephone appears and recites a text, confirming his presence. The hiss of escaping air (from the oxygen tank, as directed by Beuys) dominates the recording's next passage as the piano refrain continues in the background. The text recited by Beuys also appears on the album's cover:

BEI EINEM WESENSGEMÄSSEN BESCHREIBEN
DES GESCHEHENS ZUR BEFREIUNG DER VON DER
FÄHIGKEIT GETRAGENEN ARBEIT IS ES DOCH
LOGISCH, DASS DAS TRAGENDE ZUERST BEFREIT
WERDEN MUSS.

Whilst being difficult to translate, Greg Lutz formulated it as, "If you want to free the work resulting from ability, it's logical to first free the ability."

This final recording remains a potent example of Christiansen's ability to combine everyday sounds into a melange of unusual musical matter. It's a hybrid work of piano, tape, objects, electronics, and an assortment of sound-producing devices. All of these elements are mixed with a collage technique resulting in an energy that is unique to the art of juxtaposing disparate elements. The result is a topography of sound that encourages the listener to undertake a broad and unsettling journey. It is difficult to place this within any practice, trend, thought, or period of music at this time. Christiansen was opinionated and stubborn. Both traits allowed him to express a voice that may otherwise have remain unheard. I imagine the voice, being as stubborn as it was, made it difficult for people to position his craft in the general milieu, resulting in it being easier to ignore or avoid than embrace and swim within.

The background, the space where music happens, is what I want to put into the foreground.

—Henning Christiansen

Henning Christiansen is sympathetic to all sounds. He did not distinguish a hierarchy amongst any of them: they are not formulated into an ambient hue or twisted into extreme shapes; rather, the rattle of a piano's low end can sit alongside fried electronics, and the reverb-drenched sonic conversation that can take place in a large acoustic space is on par with the striking of a hammer on an anvil. The human voice recites text with natural phrasing, or may be re-framed as parody via varispeed tape manipulation. The ringing of a phone, the sound of a boat, children's toys, and cheap effects all share an equal platform for consideration.

A Christiansen recording may encompass stones and vacuum cleaners, coins in a glass bowl, footsteps on gravel, a bullfrog, rocks in a box, a pipe, a blood pipe, a canary, sheep, and hens, with the animals not broadcast as field recordings caught on tape but rather seen as performers in their own right. There is a genuine love of sound, but one which is explored in the natural world, not dissected in the concert hall or transmitted by state of the art diffusion; even Christiansen's early compositional works were often executed in less formal environments. Of course, any distinction between high and low culture was dismantled long ago, so that a man writing for a string quartet in one decade and recording stones being thrown into a bucket the next is hardly surprising, but what stands out here is how smooth Christiansen's transition was. There is no "pain" in his work, no screams of violence as we hurtle from the remaining fragments of the old world. In fact, as we have now made clear, his diverse output veered wildly from romantic string works to the sound of a single object being recorded with zero context or processing. An example of this later approach would be *Op.209–6 Opinions*, which simply documents the results of moving a sound producing object, in this case a rainstick, two variations of small bells, a small chime, a children's harmonica, and one of those children's toys that makes the "moo" sound of a cow when moved around. Nothing else exists except the simple direct sound and the silence in between.

Christiansen's work has a sympathetic relationship with the unusual (reality) and his tendency to explore unpopulated parameters of musical practice positions him outside of those that intend to provoke with conscious shifts in formal practice. He is enjoying himself, and as a result the listener is placed in a position to join him in this playful practice—although I question whether the perspectives Christiansen eventually manifested would have come about if it were not for his formative years at the Royal Conservatory. As he denoted:

I feel most of what I have done is based on the academic, the classical. What I learned at the Conservatory has had tremendous significance. To me, the classical is the accumulated experience on how to form a work of art freely floating in space, so that it's linked to the nature that surrounds us and is within mankind. Earlier, I said "man is also nature, it's a synthesis."

I am quite willing to renounce expressiveness and great discharges of emotion, vitality and attempts to force one's way into the mind of the listener. And I also renounce any kind of entertainment – the artist's urge to express himself in the moment of performance. It is the idea and pattern of the work that should be the object of evaluation. That is why any kind of music-making of course becomes an alien element.

–Henning Christiansen⁷

"Op.170 *Symphony Natura*" (*pazio Musikale con Animale. MUSICA dello ZOO*) is an extended collage based on recordings made with Lorenzo Mammi at the Rome Zoo in 1985. *Symphony Natura* is not a work of acoustic ecology. Although the recorded sounds are indeterminate, the addition of sounds in post-production, such as electronics, piano recordings, etc., would likely repel ecological sound purists. However, the method deployed accentuates the uncanniness of nature itself. When discussing this work we see the line between traditional composition and Christiansen's more nature-based work drawn explicitly. Christiansen said:

First of all, I think of Bruckner's great symphonies modelled after nature, from the days of flourishing orchestral culture, great feelings and gazing into the soundscape. Which was always the landscape of a concert hall and musicians dressed up as penguins, many violins. Originally most ideals of instrumental sounds were derived from animal voices or other sounds of natural phenomena. The violins, for instance: someone found out that stretched out, dried bowels could produce sounds. There is a funny saying: "My bowels are crying."

Later the original recordings that had been taken from the Rome Zoo and reworked were played back via a multi-channel, eight-speaker setup to the very animals whose howls, hoots, cries, snorts, screeches, and snarls were recorded in the original session. Around the same period other recordings were made of the response the animals made to the playback of their own voices, resulting in *Symphony Natura 2* and *Symphony Natura 3*.

I have worked with animal voices before, in the ROMA ZOO, e.g., I made a suite of animal voices which I called *SYMPHONY NATURA*, I have also worked with the howling of wolves and with canaries (*The Green Birdchoir Piano*, Museum of Art, Northern Jutland) (*Freedom is Around the Corner*, Gelbe Musik, Berlin) and also monkey singing, all of it nature variations on tape. What is important to me now is where and in which context such works are being performed. I have been in concert halls, in theaters, but I am not really happy with these environments for my animal music. I have to construct new "concert halls" for such works and therefore I really like this relatively large "Concert Castle" on the meadow at the Danube in front of the famous Brucknerhaus, it is ideal for me and I am writing a new slogan: "Sheep instead of Violins." The meadow belongs to the sheep, it is their territory, that's where they belong and people come to visit them. Together with the Sheep's Music coming from a container, I realize another idea in container nr. 2: I have tried to bring Grieg's Peer Gynt-Suite "back to nature." When working on it, I try to imagine what Edvard Grieg had heard in *GUDBRANDSDAL*⁸ in Norway before setting that sound into the musical language of that time and for the concert hall and we must keep in mind that Grieg's Peer Gynt-Suite is still one of the most popular orchestra pieces today. I now take this piece of orchestra music out of its usual concert background and put it onto the meadow on the riverbank in front of the Brucknerhaus together with Sheep's Music.

⁸ *Op.178 Gudbrandsdal* was made to honor the eightieth anniversary of Grieg's passing and first premiered at the Henie-Onstad Art Centre, Høvikodden, Oslo, in March 1987. This piece features a text based on Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* and features a series of shorter sound pieces, heavily processed—rare for a Christiansen work—and dark and dramatic in tone and color.

⁷ Ibid.

Besides, I am also interested in transporting this piece of music from Norway to Austria in this form. In former days, the transportation of music was not as simple as today, there had been practical and cultural problems that we are hardly aware of today. Music travels light these days.
–Henning Christiansen

Following *Symphony Natura*, animals began to appear often in Christiansen's works, with canaries, sheep, and wolves being regular fixtures in recordings and performance. *I am a bird / io am en vogel* was an exhibition at the Emily Harvey Gallery, New York City, in 1992 that featured canaries living in a cage in the gallery space throughout the exhibition and contributing to a live performance held in the space by Christiansen. *Schafe Statt Geigen* was first performed in Linz, Austria, in July 1988. The performers included Christiansen and thirty sheep. The subsequent audio recording is not a straight field recording, but rather represents the utilization of performers to make a composition—the sheep as oils for Christiansen's canvas. Often these recordings were then made available as multi-channel sound installations alongside scores, documentation of each original performance, etc.

The sound of the wolf appears on numerous recordings. An anecdote told to me by one of Christiansen's sons, Thorbjørn, is worth repeating: Christiansen was obsessed with the sound of the wolf, the howl of the wolf, this striking lone cry. For a number of years Christiansen would get out of bed in the middle of the night, go to the top floor of the house and play a recording of a lupe (wolf) on CD, loudly, over and over, for thirty minutes or so. Every night this ritual would repeat whilst the rest of the family were sleeping. The family would wake in their beds to the sound, and they all knew he was at it again, listening to that sound. It was not pleasant for them as such, but they knew Christiansen and they let him be. Christiansen would take vinyl from his children's collection and paint the records green to transform them into a "nature-sound-object." One of his daughter's shoes went missing for weeks, only to turn up nailed to a circular board, again painted green. Obsession. This was Christiansen's approach: serious, comical, and committed in his singular stubborn outlook. Sound familiar? Animals.

Op.1766 *Penthesilea* from 1986 is a significant work in Christiansen's canon, an epic music/sound narrative which appeared in many forms and was presented amongst many varied



Fig. 30

Henning Christiansen working on *OPUS 158*. Photo by Thorbjørn Reuter Christiansen.

performances in Italy and elsewhere throughout the '80s. Along with the work he initially developed with Beuys, Op.189 *Manresa* (1991), *Penthesilea* is one of the largest works conceived by Henning. The recorded version in the archive has a running time of four and a half hours and is a staggering tableaux of disorienting sound and obtuse atmospheres. Inspired by the Heinrich von Kleist play of the same name, *Penthesilea* was undoubtedly one of the foremost influences on both Christiansen's and Ursula's creative outputs. A work well ahead of its time, Kleist's masterpiece reconfigures the traditional Amazonian narrative in which women never fall in love and are constantly at the mercy of the male heroes. The women even proclaim themselves a sovereign dominion, a "Frauenstaat." At one point, when the Queen Tanaïs is challenged by a male voice proclaiming that women are a laughing stock because, "impeded by full breasts, [they] could never draw a bow and loose its power as readily as men,"⁹ she tears off her right breast, inaugurating Amazon autonomy. Incorporating sadomasochism whilst documenting the extreme psychological state of the protagonist has allowed Kleist's work to override past critics with its *exploration of gender roles and the psychology of eroticism and violence*.

Many of Christiansen's later collaborators appear in this work, which depicts the Kleist's story as a sound radio play. One can discern the sound of horses, a boxing match, wind, feet walking through sleet, birds, etc. amongst all manner of unusual sonic activity, leading the listener deeper into a strange and abstracted space as we enter "Penthesilea's Hule" (cave). The mood here is as exquisitely unsettling as anything else Christiansen created and once again positions itself well outside of any mainframe experimental agendas. Sounds bleed into musical forms, and the border between a sound portrait and abstract space is navigated with such subtle aplomb that one is left in a bewildering, quasi-musical soundscape befitting the radical tone of the original Kleist text.

The music is architectural because it consists of clear, distinct sound-characters in a sequence. The sequence is a form, from here to there, but it could also be from there to here, or from there to over there; it's hard to describe where time goes from and to—as form, that is—but maybe also in general, and when Christiansen's music stops, perhaps

it's just the beginning—the tap that drips, the car that drives by the phone that rings... or maybe what was going on alongside the sounds. Although Henning uses many sounds—feet on a gravel road, the lapping of waves, a tuba, canaries singing, a piano, the car... it isn't the collage that counts, but the collage's total determination of the individual elements into a total painterly form. The individual sound is itself, preserves it's identity, it's character. They are elements in a house of sound and time—the meanings or absences of meaning arise between the eardrums.

—Bjørn Nørgaard

The technique of re-working older material is a common theme throughout Christiansen's output. Sonic motifs re-appear on various recordings, re-contextualized in a manner that highlights the transitory element of sound resulting in an ongoing sonic palimpsest. The sound of the wolf, a certain piano phrase, these electronic interlopers, recordings of the ocean on Møn. All sounds can be locked into a composition, but even within these constructed walls there is an inherent restless spirit in which they remain anxious and adaptable.

Recordings only ever remind us of something that is irrevocably past and gone. Yet there is a way of updating the past: in performances Henning Christiansen combines earlier compositions and sound recordings with new live sounds. Thus he builds up cumulative sounds creating complex progression that extends beyond the transience of the individual event. Perhaps this chronological superimposition of audio-spaces—like a piece of paper that is written on again and again – constitutes by far the most consistent relic of the Actions (because it is also the most processual), whereas any visual record, no matter what form it may take, can only ever consist of excerpts.

—Hajo Schiff

Christiansen's less pedantic approach is one of the more appealing aspects of his craft. He never positioned himself as a visionary or an intellectual. If we take a look at two major works made for "stones" in the late part of the twentieth century we may see the crux of what makes Christiansen's creative out disarmingly unfamiliar to the general approach of sound artists in the lineage of Cage.

9 Agee, 94.

In 1968–74 Christian Wolff wrote an instructive score based around stones. The performer is asked to play these objects as a means of extracting the sound matter from within:

Make sounds with stones, draw sounds out of stones, using a number of sizes and kinds (and colours); for the most part discretely; sometimes in rapid sequences. For the most part striking stones with stones, but also stones on other surfaces (inside the open head of a drum, for instance) or other than struck (bowed, for instance, or amplified). Do not break anything.

—Christian Wolff, *STONES*¹⁰

When one listens to performances of this (justifiably) revered work one gets a sense that the players take a very considered approach, painfully extracting the sonic potential of the stones with all the delicacy of an archeologist brushing away the last remains of dust to see what ancient treasures lurk beneath the surface. Henning Christiansen also recorded stones, but his approach was quite different. He set up a microphone and threw stones into a bucket within the vicinity of the microphone. The resulting patters and clunks are recognizable, yet they strike the listener as unusual. Both Wolff's and Christiansen's pieces are beautiful approaches, in their simplicity and outcome, to dealing with the same source, but one distinction is that I don't think Christiansen cares if he breaks anything.

...I wanted to work with the whole sound of a film. Perhaps not the actors, but the whole original tone, the normal sounds: leaves, a car driving. I wanted to work on all of that electronically, so that it could be defamiliarized in some way. I found that very interesting. Then music left me. I discovered, that the tape recorder was the single truly new instrument of the twentieth century. The other instruments are connected to dreams of organ music, all that one dreamt about the organ's being able to do. This electronic idea continued. I have called one's working with real sound "music as foundation." This "foundation" is reality for me.

—Henning Christiansen¹¹

¹⁰ Christian Wolff, *Prose Collection*, 1968-74 (Lebanon, NH: Frog Peak Music), 9.

¹¹ Conz, in the present volume.



Fig. 31

Henning Christiansen, *Tiefland*, Rome, 1986. Photo by Solfrid Olette Mortensen.

From the mid-'80s to the middle of the following decade we enter the most creative and fertile period of Christiansen's career. There exists an enormous amount of recordings—both studio and live documentations—in the archive. These sit amongst an abundance of scores, artworks, objects, posters, films, interviews, photographs, and all manner of documentation covering the genesis of Christiansen's creative output up until his death. The amount of associated documentation accelerated as various recording and playback tools entered the marketplace and subsequently, the domestic sphere, throughout Christiansen's life: magnetic tape, cassette tapes, DAT tapes, compact discs all figure in the broad scope Christiansen's recorded output. The volume of work and related documentation in the archive is staggering.

All "studio" recordings were made in his home, the tape machine being his major instrument. Ursula explained that he would often be late for family dinners: whilst the others ate, Christiansen would only hurry in at some point, eat, and then head straight back to his home studio and continue working into the late evening hours. His recorded output is so vast that, despite having worked with the archive for half a decade now, I would estimate I have heard less than a quarter of his overall output.

Throughout the '90s, collaboration became an intrinsic factor for Christiansen's work, contributing to a more expansive vision and sound world, both in his studio output and live performance. In this period Christiansen was a teacher at the Kunsthochschule Hamburg. Ute Wassermann and Christoph Charles were students of Christiansen's that went to become regular collaborators. Ute reflects:

Henning was very open as a teacher: poetic, anarchic, structured, and direct but not imposing himself or his views on the students. He provided space and time for experimenting together. He gave impulses and encouraged to look beyond the surface.

We had a close artistic relationship/friendship, although my solo work was/is very different from Christiansen's work. I would exchange ideas with him through phone calls, visits in Møn, or at my home (he and Ursula used to stay with us, when Ursula was a professor at art school), and through letters. I loved that his art was an

everyday experience, an inversion of hierarchies. That he abandoned traditional concert halls, used musical instruments as sound-objects and everyday objects as musical instruments. I share with him being present in different music scenes, but at the same time all the aspects of the work are connected: composition, interpretation, installation, collaborations, drawings, and open scores... interest in bird song and animal sounds—freedom is around the corner!

Henning would provide graphic scores with a timeline and drawings, poetic/atmospheric instructions. He composed a tape piece which was both reference and score at the same time. I think he completely trusted the performers he chose to work with.¹²

Collaborations in this later period range from irregular or one-off performances with the likes of Keith Rowe and Ben Patterson to more ongoing artistic relationships like that forged with the German sound engineer Ernst Ludwig Kretzer. Kretzer is a significant collaborator who contributed greatly to the shape and sound of some of Christiansen's most sophisticated recordings, such as the soundtrack Op.175 *Den Rød Skov* (1986), Op.206 *I went to my - VOICE - NOICE - CHOICE* (1993), and Op.189 *Kreuzmusik FLUXID BEHANDLUNG* (1989). Kretzer's "soundwork" appears on many recordings and performances from this period and can be discerned by his unusual processing and often outlandish compositing of disparate elements. Werner Durand also contributed to many of the later recordings and performances playing acrylic glass tubes, a baritone horn, and his self-made Pan-Nay, an instrument consisting of a bundle of plexiglas pipes without finger-holes, tuned in perfect fifths. Durand's contributions often convey a dry, spacious, windswept environment, with occasional unnerving stabs which underline the tension of whatever particular narrative is at play in each individual work.

Ursula Reuter Christiansen was a regular throughout Christiansen's career, from the late '60s onwards, often providing voice for recordings and contributing to many of the performances, often in wonderfully garish costume. Christiansen's and Ursula's children Bjornstjerne and Addamaria contributed voice to various works whilst in their teenage years, and the Christiansens' youngest

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Lawrence Kumpf, "Interview with Ute Wassermann," in the present volume.

son Thorbjørn contributed to many performances in the '90s and also made a number of video works with his father.

The Italian actress Carla Tatò was a significant regular in both Henning and Ursula Christiansen's works, including impressively terrifying performances on both the *Penthesilea* and *Den Røde Skov* recordings. Somewhat as an antidote to the more frenzied use of voice in his earlier catalogue of work, the human voice often appears in Christiansen's later works courtesy of himself, Ute Wassermann, Ursula, Tatò, etc. It is never "straight" voice, however, and ranges from the spectral to the demonic, often with a otherworldly presence. Some of the instructional scores of this period refer to the color brown—a reference to the Nazi brown shirts—and are subsequently aggressive in nature, whereas as green is presented in a more comforting manner. Op.201 *L'Essere Umano Errabondo* (1991) is a voice piece in which Henning, Ursula, and Tatò repeat phrases such as "sea," "tree," "wind," etc. whilst treated ocean sounds sway underneath, resulting a hypnotic, almost meditative mantra.

Throughout the '90s Christiansen focused more on performance, presenting live events in venues ranging from galleries and concert halls to extravagant outdoor settings of significant scale. These works, often of extended duration, incorporated a vast array of people, props, and materials: sonic objects, movement, voice, backing tapes, constructions, and the like. These performances were not strictly of a "musical" variety, as they involved real time "actions" by the likes of Bjørn Nørgaard, along with costumes, movement, text, and elements of quasi-theater. Often different events would occur simultaneously on different parts of the stage. An example of this would be in *Tiefland* (*Beuys pit*), which was first performed at Teatro Olimpico, Rome, Italy, in 1986. On one stage built over an orchestral pit, performers Philip Corner, Terry Fox, Walter Marchetti, and Emmett Williams would act out a series of individual performances, whilst under the stage in the actual pit Christiansen, along with Ernst Kretzer, Bjørn Nørgaard, and thirty chickens, would act out their part (Christiansen would say he would rather have chickens than musicians in the orchestra pit).

In 1987 Christiansen performed *NYHAVNSTRUT-HAFENBREI* (*stew music*) in Nyhavn (New Harbor), a 17th-century waterfront and canal in Copenhagen, along with Kretzer and Wassermann. In addition to an extremely hectic backing tape and the extreme vocalizations of Wassermann, the performance

incorporated the sounds of moored and passing ships; the motors, bells, horns, etc. resulted in a wild public cacophony of performance and environment. All of these performances were designed with a precise theme/concept and associated story. There was an outline of a beginning and end with a development from A to Z, but with a vast allowance of movement for each individual in the middle. The backing tape was often manipulated live, with Christiansen encouraging others to play around with the material he had constructed. Nothing is ever "fixed" in Christiansen's world view, hence the constant re-working and re-contextualizing of previous material. These were spontaneous events with no cues or calculated timing, allowing for unexpected events to bloom.

THE END

Henning Christiansen passed away on December 10, 2008. Since this time there has been accelerated interest as his unique oeuvre is discovered by generations old and new. In recent years recordings have appeared, and performances of his works are becoming increasingly common.

In 2007 the legendary German art curator and collector René Block initiated an art space and residency programme in affiliation with the Henning Christiansen archives on the island of Møn. Kunsthal 44 Møen was set up as a long-standing collaboration between Møn-based artists such as Bjørn Nørgaard, Ursula Reuter Christiansen, and the deceased Henning Christiansen, along with international actors connected with the Fluxus-movement. In Autumn 2013 an extensive tribute to Christiansen was held in the recently acquired building next door to the gallery (which also stands opposite to the Christiansen family home). *The Hammer Without a Master: Henning Christiansen's Archive* was an interdisciplinary exhibition and performance series for which curator the Chiara Giovando invited a host of international artists, composers, musicians, and poets to respond to the Henning Christiansen archive. The artists—Jacob Kirkegaard (Denmark), Tori Wrånes (Norway), Leif Elggren (Sweden), Gordon Monahan (Canada), and Marja-leena Sillanpää (Sweden), and the composers Tobias Kirstein and Claus Haxholm (Great Britain), Andreas Fuhrer (Great Britain), John Lund (Denmark), and Vagn E. Olsson (Great Britain) all made works related to an aspect of Christiansen's output, in order to



Fig. 32 Henning Christiansen's tombstone, Møn. Photo by Norman Wilcox-Geissen.

develop individual works, auditory and physical installations, sound sculptures, etc. which looked back at the legacy of Christiansen's audio and visual output whilst positioning these in a contemporary context.

The 2012 Wundergrund Festival in Denmark celebrated the fiftieth birthday of Fluxus, including a special performance component simply entitled *HENNING*, which contained segments entitled "Henning is repetition," "Henning is No. 1," "Henning is No. 2," "Henning is No. 3," "Christiansen's crown," "Henning is green," "Henning crawls," "Henning will out," "Henning banks," and "Henning will enter."

In the UK, in 2013, the exhibition *At the moment of being heard* at the South London Gallery, under the curatorship of Simon Parris, presented the 8-channel sound installation, Op.170 *Symphony Natura* (1985). The collage of electronic drones and animal sounds recorded at the Rome Zoo was presented alongside the original hand-painted scores. UK ensemble Apartment House performed the UK premiere of *Fluxus Organum* at Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in November 2013. For this performance Anton Lukoszevieve arranged a new version of the original church organ tape piece for string quartet. Lukoszevieve and Apartment House have presented *Requiem of Art Fluxus Organum* in New York and London; a variety of sound interpolations both old and new are mixed in amongst a new arrangement of the score for string quartet.

* * *

At the funeral of Henning Christiansen, on the grounds of the beautiful Fanefjord Church, located on his beloved island of Møn, a coffin designed by his carpenter friend Niels Hauberg Wright was laid slowly into the ground. The passage proved resistant as the wooden casket faltered on its descent. The sides of the coffin struggled while navigating the sides of the recently exposed soil and greater effort to descend our deceased friend only laid bare a higher level of stubbornness. A complete halt came to proceedings with no further downward progression possible. Silence amongst those in attendance soon led to muffled giggles, which shifted spontaneously into cumulative laughter as the coffin was eventually raised back to an earthly domain. A saw entered the picture as a means of cutting back the coffin, and an extraordinary collective energy reached a crescendo as the objective of the object was finally achieved. Henning Christiansen was laid to rest. All present agreed: this was a final performance by an extraordinary man who cultivated an

extremely broad and colourful career. A multitude of drinks and reflections led us into the night.

THE FUTURE

The work of Henning Christiansen has endured after his passing. His non-dogmatic stance and unwillingness to fall into certain experimental or new music tropes unfolds a unique legacy which snakes its way along its own path, only to rear its multi-faceted head above ground at a later date. We know there is more to come. This much we certainly know.

REALITY

The action is precisely the way to get back to the primal, to try out your ideas at the edge of the art establishment with the expansive technology. You set yourself up, very personally, and try to resolve something primal for yourself and for a usually small audience of alert, extremely attentive people. There's something salon-like, exclusive, about this excess, but it's a ragged salon and shabby exclusiveness. Heaven knows why we gather around the action as something important. We want to find something, we look for new paths, for the life of a mind. Heaven must know something we don't know? If we perpetually conserve the past, if it piles up, we become shadows of ourselves.

—Henning Christiansen¹³



13 “From action to Production,” in *HENNING CHRISTIANSEN: Composer, Fluxist and out of order*, 451.

Fig. 33

dust out of brain, music objects at Henning Christiansen's last performance, November 4, 2008, Copenhagen. Photo by York Wegerhoff.