

The
Waves

Espen
Sommer
Eide



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The Waves is a spatial music album composed, recorded, mixed and exhibited by Espen Sommer Eide

feat. Martin Taxt, Mari Kvien Brunvoll, Jochem Vanden Ecker

Recorded at Marres, Maastricht from August 2018 until August 2019

Text assemblage from works by Virginia Woolf, Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead

Read by Elina Bry

Vinyl release on SOFA Music, 2019

Interview Espen Sommer Eide

February—October 2019
Valentijn Byvanck

The following interview is based on a series of conversations with the artist/composer Espen Sommer Eide during the course of several years. Sommer Eide came first into contact with Marres when he produced his work *Distribution of the Audible* for the exhibition *Undertones* (2014). He returned to Maastricht for a session in our *Training the Senses* program on the subject of Sensing Nature in 2017. At that time we discussed the sensory life of animals, one of many of Sommer Eide's interests. It was on a visit to Oslo in the late spring of 2018 that we finally settled on the idea that he would create a spatial album for Marres. The recordings started in the late Summer of that same year.

De poortkamer

On the first day of recording I spent most of the day alone on the first floor in the poortkamer, the room above the gated entrance of Marres. I just ended up sitting there for most of the day, trying out different sounds to feel how it would fit that space. I also listened to a lot of sounds from activity in and around the restaurant, children in the playground and the traffic outside. Towards the end of the day things became more quiet and I set up my instrument. I brought a kind of lap steel guitar that I had constructed four years earlier for a performance in the Sonic Acts festival. I was travelling with the philosopher Timothy Morton at that time, and he named it 'the exploded lap steel.'

A lap steel guitar is a beautiful musical instrument, often used for country music, and Indian music too. You sit down with it and use a metal or glass piece to slide across a series of strings. The main goal for me in the construction of this instrument is that it has no frets and I can freely alter the tuning systems and scales. I wanted to see if I could make something interesting with it for Marres. While playing it, I was tuning into the atmosphere of the place. We used a photo from this session for the cover of the vinyl album.

Many of the instruments I build are not only musical but also philosophical instruments. To be more precise: they are both, in the sense that they investigate a subject. When I make them I am

investigating something beyond the instrument itself. They pose questions to a place, instead of recording it. A few years ago I made a harmonica instrument that plays the endangered language of the Skolt Sami people who live in the northern parts of Norway, Finland and Russia. The goal was to make an instrument that would be integrated into the cultural universe of this people, a philosophical tool to archive something that is disappearing—but at the same time making the language into music.

For the project at Marres I imagined that each instrument would evoke a different historical layer. So I brought a modified hurdy-gurdy, a medieval string instrument, a hand crank-turned wheel that functions a bit like a violin bow rubbing against the strings. I modified its principles to be able, as with the steel guitar, to flexibly tune it while playing. The hurdy-gurdy evokes the imagination of a history that took place long before the house was built. Like a wandering musician who travels through the area and has made a camp in the garden room. Also the crank has a circular motion and makes the Marres building come alive like a machine. Another instrument is the harpsichord, which might evoke the imagination of a ghost coming in and out, like in the Victorian age. And of course Martin Taxt's special microtonal tuba that can sound like anything, from Stone Age horns in a vast forest to the modern-day brass bands of Maastricht.

An album and a building

I like the idea of an album for a building or, more exactly, an album *and* a building as a series of parallel histories. It would be wrong to think of the project as a translation of architecture into sound, as if there could be a signature sound of Marres. Instead, we should see it as a series of parallel movements. People naturally feel the sound of architecture in a big church because it's so overwhelming, but they might not have the same conscious acoustic experience with regular architecture. Yet, every house has numerous histories and stories that resonate through it. When you enter it, it stirs an imagination of all kinds of human and material stories. The psychologist C.G. Jung once described a house as a mental map. From top to bottom, he listed a first floor from the 19th century built on top of a ground floor from the 16th century, which was reconstructed from a 11th century dwelling-tower and rested on Roman foundation walls in the cellar, underneath which Stone Age tools and remnants of glacial fauna could be unearthed. I believe music can channel such layers, with the help of the acoustic properties of the house and the immaterial qualities of sound.

The album begins by posing a question. I am not just sitting down and registering, nor am I copying the sounds of the place or recording the space

itself. It's not like that, it's more like finding a portal, tuning into a space, finding the right wavelength. The sounds of children playing outside, the light and sounds from windows and doors, the traffic movements, the restaurant opening and closing. They occur each at specific moments during the day. You only realize that and can feel the character of a place when you experience this rhythm. It feels natural to talk about space in the musical terms of getting attuned to and picking up on the rhythms of a space.

The Waves allows us to challenge conceptions of sound and music, and furnish a way to philosophize about the work. Sometimes you rush to finish an album because you need to start touring with it. When you start performing it live, you realize that it has much more potential, and you can develop the sounds further and further into something entirely new. In *The Waves* we can experience this double potential at once. A year of recording was followed by months of mixing and sampling, during which I allowed all the materials to be shaped and reshaped. Then, while the album is being printed on vinyl, I am freed up to think about a new version of the materials for the rooms of Marres.

One thing that struck me when preparing the rooms for the installation is that the album tracks need to be reconfigured as to enable the music to be floating in mid-air, thus enabling visitors to walk through and around the sound, rather than listening to it from

one position. This development is very interesting to me. If we go further down the biological route, all movement has rhythmicity. The Norwegian neurologist and musician Geir Olve Skeie observes how the body has the tendency to synchronize to collective rhythms. When we walk we adapt to the rhythm of the people we walk with. That might be one interesting function of music, that music and rhythms can attune human bodies, bring them closer to each other and even make them coalesce. To adapt to each other's rhythm is a community-sense buried deep in our biology. Perhaps we are musical beings for this reason.

The Waves

Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves* was an important source of inspiration. The Bloomsbury group, inspired by philosophers like Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead, were interested in exploring the question what the world would be without humans, that is, without anybody seeing or hearing it. Stream of consciousness is important for me, as a belief in multiple simultaneous perspectives, parallel stories and inner and outer monologues. In the circle around Woolf you find the immense influence of the new electromagnetic wave theories, that suggest that the world is one enormous entanglement of events and people. It was also a time where scientific experiments were inseparable from performative art works. Woolf grew up in a time in which huge crowds would come to witness the scientist Hermann von Helmholtz do an acoustic experiment with tuning forks transmitting sympathetic resonance. In *The Waves*, you don't exactly know where the voices are coming from or who is speaking. It is very refreshing to relax your own aesthetic sense and mode of creativity, challenge yourself by collaborating with other artists and open up to the multiple perspectives of your surroundings. I believe this sensitivity and indeed outlook on life is very important today, as a counterpoint to the many polarized positions and echo chambers. I believe experimental

artworks with multiple layers and centers contribute to a more open and generous culture, away from the ever-stronger normalizing tendencies in our world: opening doors rather than shutting them.

Microtones and reverberation

[Martin Taxt]

Martin Taxt plays a microtonal tuba. This tuba has extra valves that allow the musician to add multiple additional pitches in between each note and it is very hard to master. The instrument allows the player to tune in to fine pitches that would resonate in particular rooms, so that we can almost scientifically identify the so-called room tone. It also allows us to play microtone music, in which you explore different tuning systems. In standardized instruments with discrete pitch intervals, the instrument tends to instruct the player in how it is to be played. Microtonal instruments free the player from this material memory.

Microtonal music has quite a history. One composer I admire is Harry Partch [1901–1974], a contemporary of John Cage and, in a way, his complete opposite. He was an alternative composer with a unique outsider universe of sound. He researched and built intricate scales as well as lots of instruments. He also made his own records. In documentaries you see him packing records to ship them off to customers, doing everything himself. I really like his do-it-yourself practice, as well as his openness to all kinds of sounds, and all sides of life.

We did some experiments with the tuba to see what would happen with the long echoes on the ground floor of

Marres. We walked around with the tuba to discover echo traces in the house and tried to make pendulums of sound. Or we sent a tone into the space and while we picked up its returning vibration we played simultaneously other tones, creating a cluster of notes at different pitches. Together we made makeshift rules, and while playing we always ended up breaking them. These experiments were fascinating. I imagined sitting in a room while the sound is going out the door, up the stairs, a little bit back and forth, rummaging around like a mad dog in the attic, and then it reverbs back again in the shape of this weird cluster. A mash of sound, very different from the sounds that you played before, where even the pitches seem bent by the architecture of the house.

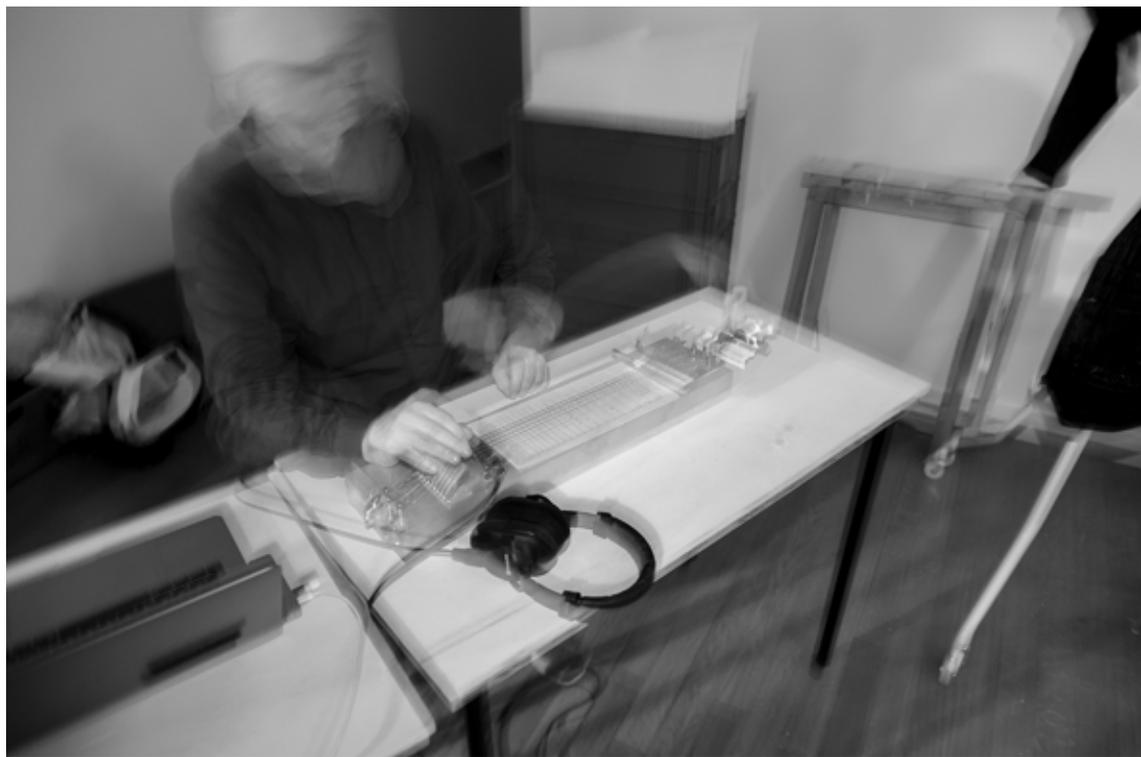
The recording sessions also constituted a kind of performance. When Taxt was moving or walking back and forth playing, or when he sat down on a chair in the center of the Wintertuin [Wintergarten]. like a human lighthouse, turning the tuba around while seated, we imagined invisible tracks in the house as if it were a carefully choreographed piece.

Martin Taxt would also tune in to the hurdy-gurdy and we recorded one of his parts over the hurdy-gurdy track, so that was like a typical studio session in which he could hear what I had done before. I had this mobile recording system set up, so that we could move around and create room

The barking of a thousand dogs, at night
At the limit of earshot
Distant, disembodied sounds
At the edges of the private world
The external signs of other worlds
Night flowing down
A rotating lighthouse
The city seen through a mist
Distant and peaceful and strange
The sheep coughed
One flower bent slightly towards another
Car wheels rushed ceaselessly in a circle
Leaves sighed overhead
Voices came to her very strangely,
floating like flowers on water,
cut off from all
like a faint scent
a violin next door
Emanating from other worlds,
the voices of unseen speakers,
the music of unseen musicians
Someone was practicing scales
some insect dashed at her,
boomed in her ear, and was gone
a door opened and shut
snow flopped from a branch,
otherwise all was silent

Time passes
there rose that half-heard melody
the tremor of cut grass
in the evening,
one after another the sounds die out,
and the harmony falters,
and silence falls
for the sleepers in the house
as the curtains of dark wrapped themselves over the house
so that they lay with several folds of blackness on their eyes
the mantle of silence wove into itself the falling cries of birds,
the drone and hum of the fields, a dog's bark, a man's shout,
and folded them round the house in silence
the interval of sleep
until the chorus beginning,
a bird sings,
a faint green quickens,
like a turning leaf,
in the hollow of a wave
atoms raining down
a collection of events











The failing light
turns objects into so many moons
Some wave of white went over the window pane
The real flower on the window sill,
was attended by the phantom flower
Looked at again and again half consciously,
by a mind thinking of something else
The furniture of the world
its tables heaped with fruit,
wears the wavering,
unreal appearance of a place where one waits
expecting something to happen

Drop upon drop silence falls
Burning on the rim of the dark
Rippled it so strangely
Wavered and vanished, waterly
What lacks form is what creates form
The house, the hive and the dinner table

There at perception's limits,
beat the waves
Resounding like gigantic tuning-forks
The waves of light and sound
one, two, one, two
The ring after ring of sound
The leaden circles dissolved in the air
The dust dance

Downpouring of immense darkness
wash away the mass and edge
Swallowed up a jug and basin
Like a mist rising
quiet rose
The vast clouds of an indifferent world

The years passed one after another across the sky
Each spread the same ripple
like signals from sunken islands
The being grows rings, like a tree
an eye, an ear, a window
A countable series
Thick strokes moving
one after another
beneath the surface
following each other
pursuing each other
perpetually

The little airs that invade the house
scarcely disturbed the peace,
the indifference,
the air of pure integrity,
in which loveliness and stillness clasped hands

This smoke, this fine early morning air
Breath, smoke, clouds
Seen but not touched
amorphous formlessness manifests itself
in a random wandering
Dancing gnats

for more sessions and extra recordings. I find it very interesting that the preparations for this project have spread out across a whole year. You can create a deliberately slow process in which everything is delayed and you can add things later. The musicians are rarely playing in the same room, so it's not an improvisation or group session. Instead, you are adding things piece by piece so that the entire recording process is expanded in time and space.

Text and song

[Mari Kvien Brunvoll]

Mari Kvien Brunvoll often talks about her wish to listen to herself from the outside. And to be surprised by herself, by what she sounds like. I believe this searching for moments of otherness is at the core of our improvisation with voice and voice-like sounds. Kvien Brunvoll has a wide range of vocal techniques that bend and shape words in new ways, moving effortlessly between reciting, talking, singing, sometimes breathtakingly beautiful, at other times almost inhuman and machinelike. Abrupt changes create small shocks in the listener, what she calls 'shortcuts to the heart'.

The text collage with quotes, mostly from Woolf, and a few words from Whitehead and Russell, is not meant to convey a particular message, but to be the raw material for our improvisations and permutations. The sound of words constitutes a layer of meaning that surrounds us all the time. It creates small misunderstandings or 'mis-hearings' and propels our conversations forward, often without us being aware of it. This soundscape of language is to me like very old music.

When I was looking for a voice to recite the text more specifically for one of the tracks, I contacted the Glasgow Radiophrenia festival of radio art. The last time I performed there I heard a wonderful voice announcing the bands on the radio. The funny thing is that I have

never met the voice in person, not even seen a picture, so for me Elina Bry is only this disembodied radio voice. A perfect match for *The Waves*.

I should mention here the new instrument or group of instruments called the Sonants, that Mari Kvien Brunvoll and I worked with in the attic. They are made specifically to encourage spatial improvisation, and have a looped, repetitive time structure. A central light circles and triggers the speakers when it hits a light sensor, and each responds by playing its individual sound sampled by the performer. The performers can also start moving the Sonants around in the room or even into other rooms and we spent many nights in this way exploring the space in darkness. For me the most interesting sensory experiences occur when sonic and visual impulses interweave in unexpected ways.

Live, mixed & sampled

I've always been interested in live recording, but always for the purpose of sampling it. That is how I got into electronic music in the 90s, with sample-based bedroom electronic music where you sit for hours and hours through the night to edit and alter sounds. You would sample a live recording and then start cutting and pasting. After releasing a couple of albums the record company wanted me to perform live, so I was kind of dragged onto a stage. After a while, I learned to deal with it. I started to build instruments and develop ways of making live music. I enjoyed that very much since it allowed me to improvise with other people. Yet I still feel that everything began with the recording and I still lean towards making recordings or albums very much as a craft in itself, separate from the live element. Of course the recordings stem from a live situation, but not necessarily from a recorded acoustic instrument. They can also be manipulations of field recordings or any other kind of audible material that you cut and paste and make new worlds out of. On top of the tracks we recorded, this album for instance contains all kinds of sounds that are in and around Marres. For example, the photographer Jochem vanden Ecker found ten old balls in the big garden of Marres. The balls stem from the abutting

schoolyard and were apparently not yet collected or not found by the school children. We proceeded to record an indoor multi-ball dribble match with the Marres kitchen staff. A lot of fun, and the source of some interesting rhythms too.

The art world provides the opportunity and time to do projects that include research. At some point I was touring with *Alog*, a group of four or five people on stage with an enormous amount of home-built instruments. It took forever to put up a show. It was becoming increasingly hard to do this touring and we never had enough time to really develop a project in depth and explore something over time. The art practice also allowed me to return to my philosophy background. I started with music because I wanted to get away from philosophy but then I started to miss philosophy again and wanted to sort of integrate it into the music and reflect upon sound and music and space, the social aspects of music, and instruments. And how all of this relates to life and a local or situated experience. The art world provides that opportunity.

Music and sound

For *The Waves* I started with the idea that the work would be about music rather than sound art. Normally it's easier to talk about sound than music in an exhibition format. If you talk about music in an exhibition, people assume you will play live music at an opening or something like that. To integrate music into a project like this is a real challenge. Instead of calling the final installation sound sculptures, perhaps I should call them spatial loop sculptures or something with a link to more musical structures. The loop, or the repetition, is central to what I try to do here, and marks first and foremost a musical structure. Even the vinyl record itself has this circular motion, and one experiment has been to cut beats into it with a knife, to create what is called locked grooves. It is like what you hear at five in the morning after you had fallen asleep, when the record has come to an end with only the innermost groove on endless repeat, including its clicks and pops.

I make music based on the qualities of the sounds. Sample-based, or *musique concrète*, or whatever you want to call it. The method is usually to go back and forth between discovering and making interesting sounds, and composing them into musical structures. All sounds have melodic structures hidden in their frequency spectrum, or repeating rhythms hiding in their noise. If you listen carefully to the church bells

in Maastricht you will find all kinds of extra tones and melodies inside their apparent single-toned ringing. The use of digital effects on the sounds, like filtering out frequencies and changing the speed of a recording, open up these hidden sounds so they can be more easily abstracted and melted into others. It is all about connections and correspondences. It is sometimes like a puzzle that needs solving. At other times they are like secret worlds, microscopic ecosystems with their own inner logic. A track is finished when it has become such a world, and then it is put in a constellation of other tracks to form an album.

Records were of paramount importance to me when I was growing up in the small town of Tromsø in northern Norway. I had few opportunities to experience alternative music live. The transformative experiences had to come from obscure records and copies of cassettes and mixtapes I obtained through an underground network of music. It could be anything from introvert shoegazer rock, to Detroit ambient techno, to New Zealand noise bands or dark romantic bands like Tuxedomoon or Dead Can Dance. I was always hunting for new music that would be exciting and fresh to me. My fellow composer David Grubbs writes in his essay *Records Ruin the Landscape* that there was often a shroud of mystery around these recordings—often one wondered how someone could actually have released something so

impenetrable and weird. The mystery could only be solved through repeated listening. Unlike live concerts, where all the melodies, rhythms, narratives and emotions have to be grasped at once, with records repetition is a central part of the listening process. You don't have to get everything the first time you hear it.

Perhaps I am trying to win back a place of concentration for music and not only for sound. I think the idea of the album is good because it has this aspect of being part of people's daily life and they can put it on repeat, they can listen to it many times in different settings. This is liberating. Listening to an album at home or on headphones somewhere, you can choose your amount of concentrated attention. This is the unique strength of the recording, and of the album as a format. It creates a kind of diffuse listening that opens up many parallel experiences, because it extends beyond the work itself and is mixed with the listeners' daily activities and personal memories.

The installation at Marres will be somewhat in between a live performance and a record. It does not force you to take in everything at once, nor is it something that you can play and replay in the same way to reach the depth of the piece. Rather, the spatial album enables visitors to experience the musical piece from all kinds of perspectives, as if it were a sculpture group you can walk around, appreciating it from all angles, while also being able to stand in the middle of it. Tarkovsky famously said that

he was sculpting time by cutting into a cluster of living facts, when he was making his movies. Music is not sculpting the time of external reality, but some interior sense of time, a time that is hard to separate from emotions. It is difficult to talk about music itself because it quickly becomes a cliché or descends into mysticism, while it is really quite natural and concrete. We all know what we're talking about already! Everything that has become this project *The Waves* for me is how I see music, what music is to me.

Espen Sommer Eide [1972] is a composer and artist based in Bergen, Norway. Using music and sound as both method and medium, his artistic practice involves long-term engagement with specific landscapes, archives, languages and rhythms, with an experimental approach to local and embodied knowledge. In addition to installation and performances, he has been a prominent representative of experimental electronic music from Norway, with main projects *Alog* and *Phonophani*, and a string of releases on the labels such as Rune Grammofon, FatCat and Hubro.

Martin Taxt [1981], born in Trondheim, Norway, finished his studies at the Academy of Music in Oslo and CNSMDP in Paris in 2006. Since then he has established himself in the international experimental music scene. He is releasing albums and touring with groups such as Koboku Senjû and Microtub. Since 2013 he has been a part of the award-winning art collective Verdensteatret.

Mari Kvien Brunvoll [1984], is one of Norway's leading improvisers in song and various eclectic instruments. A graduate of Grieg Academy in Bergen, Brunvoll has performed solo and in groups at some of Europe's best jazz clubs and festivals and released twisted albums on labels like Jazzland Recordings and Hubro. Mari Kvien Brunvoll is also part of the trio Building Instrument.

Jochem Vanden Ecker [1976] studied photography at the Media and Design Academy, Genk and has lived in Antwerp the last few years. Vanden Ecker's work is process-oriented, with a hybrid documentary method often in dialogue with other artists, architectures and situations. Vanden Ecker has released a string of artists books such as *A skydog's time*. *A skydog's place* [2015] and *From Brown to Blue* [2013].

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