

# VOX STIMULI:

## JOHN DUNCAN'S UNRESTRAINED EXPLORATIONS

---

It is a perfect late spring day in 2006, alive and humming with warmth and light. I am hemmed in on all sides by old growth trees- these are in turn populated by innumerable small birds who dart in and out of sight, their individual song phrases weaving together into a seamless ebb and flow of whistles and chirps. If we were to go by stereotypical conceptions of “extreme” artists, this would be an unusual day on which to be calling John Duncan long distance, notorious as he is for his steely psychic discipline and artistic interactions with the traumatic- he has been called an “anti-everything conceptualist...a cruel American”<sup>1</sup> by the editor of a popular alternative music magazine, and has been described by the American artist Mike Kelley as a man whose life “struck me as a living hell...his artwork...was completely caught up in self-loathing.”<sup>2</sup> However, John Duncan in conversation is almost complimentary to the surrounding idyll of springtime tranquility, hardly a dark and poisonous cloud creeping in on the idyllic scene. He speaks in a calm and metered tone that belies his decades of frontline experience- “mellowed out” would be an inappropriate term, although there is a certain sense of him being at peace with himself; content with the cumulative results of his past research. He also speaks with a noticeable absence of any kind of verbal filler, diving without hesitation into lucid explanations of his work. As with so many other people populating the netherworld of so-called “extreme” music and sound art (a term inherited rather than forwarded by these artists themselves), raw sensationalism and “don’t try this at home” cautionary nagging are all too often the elements that guide discussions on his work: artists like Duncan have also provided certain critics with an irresistible ‘straw man’ to set up in opposition to their alleged humanism and control of the moral high ground. But, if we equate ‘morality’ with a sense of selfless sacrifice, as many do, John Duncan easily trumps the critics in this debate- at various points Duncan has sacrificed his physical safety, his nationality, and even his literal manhood onto the altar of creative research.

When Japanese music critic Takuya Sakaguchi refers to John Duncan as “never a conceptual [artist], but a stimulation artist,”<sup>3</sup> he strikes at the core of what makes this man’s idiosyncratic body of work merit further discussion. John Duncan’s sound works and installations largely eschew the theoretical and the metaphorical, and are especially untainted by any hint of the ironic- “lower-case culture” could not be farther removed from his repertoire of intense actions, which demand spontaneous and revealing reactions on the behalf of participants (as well as provoking a separate set of long-term, residual effects). What, then, are some of these actions? Concerts of shortwave radio noise performed in total

darkness (or with thousands of watts of white light shining on the audience). An event in which a voluntary audience entered naked and stranded into a darkened section of a Stockholm hotel, with no clue as to when they would be eventually released. Direct confrontation of friends in their homes by the handgun-wielding artist, himself wearing a mask and later “unmasking” himself by calling up these friends and asking them their personal reactions to the confrontation.

Sensory information, in its polar extremes of saturation and deprivation, is at the heart of nearly all these actions: for every sense-flooding noise concert of Duncan's, there is an action which is literally imperceptible: pieces like *The Secret Film*, enacted in 1978, embody this latter ideal perfectly. *The Secret Film* is a Super 8 film existing only in the memories of a scant few individuals, whose identities themselves are secret, and who agreed at a secret meeting to have the contents of the film burned, before the clandestine filming location itself caught fire and was destroyed. Even without any form of physical evidence, let alone much commentary by the artist on the piece's motivations, *The Secret Film* has the potential to encourage an endless variety of discussions about the nature of the creative act itself- what could an artist's end goals be in a piece that will, at best, only be remembered through an increasingly unreliable proliferation of rumor and conjecture? Is it an indictment of the cult of personality projected onto ‘genius artists’? Is it a commentary on the way in which myths and legends still dog us in the age of mass media? Is it a gesture of unalloyed nihilism? Finally, can we consider something to be ‘art’ which exists only in the imagination, whose only acknowledgement as a previously existing cultural artifact is some brief posthumous documentation by its creator? We can either allow ourselves to be liberated or enslaved by the truth that there is no clear answer, but what we come away with is ultimately something of our own formulation- not handed down from any higher authority. So, both the techniques of saturation and deprivation are utilized in actions like the above to re-familiarize participants with pure concepts of self- and there is always a distinct possibility that the use of this information will go beyond any of the intended consequences.

Duncan's role as a “stimulation artist” demands that he assess all kinds of sensory information –not sight or sound only- and with the possible exception of taste, he has indeed surveyed the entire territory of human sensory perception and reported back with discoveries ranging from the unbearable to the sublime. In my aforementioned conversation with the multi-disciplinary artist, he assures me that “the sort of fixed divisions between forms of creative expression, that I was taught as a kid, are breaking down really fast,” adding “...and that's how it should be.”<sup>4</sup> Duncan is, of course, partially responsible for this breakdown that he mentions: if any artist can be acknowledged for applying the now clichéd concept of “pushing boundaries” to his work, John Duncan is it. Currently based in Bologna, the American expatriate (born in Kansas in 1953) has made a career of pushing against –and occasionally dissolving- the complex arrangement of

barriers we construct around our social selves. Duncan has gone through several distinct creative phases in Los Angeles, Tokyo, Amsterdam and Italy, each phase bringing a new set of social relations into the picture to test the incorruptibility of Duncan's aesthetic- so far the purity of his approach has remained intact, although the challenges have been numerous.

### **Free Music, Black Rooms, Blind Dates: The L.A. Years**

Had circumstances been different, this meager biographical sketch of Duncan might have veered closer to that of Kim Jones, an artist from whom he claims a flash of inspiration. Jones, a combat veteran of the Vietnam war, came to notoriety for his *Rat Piece*: while dressed in his full combat regalia, he set a live rat on fire in the performance space, explaining that this was one way in which deployed G.I.s dealt with the interludes of crushing boredom that linked together episodes of superlative fear and violence. Duncan himself escaped deployment to Vietnam through applying for Conscientious Objector status, but just barely: his application was, with some help from his school instructors, approved in 1971 by the draft board in Wichita, Kansas- a body which was not normally inclined to do so. Having dodged this particular bullet, Duncan relocated to Los Angeles and began his university-level artistic studies.

Originally trained as a painter, Duncan chose CalArts as the site for these studies, where he recalls becoming disillusioned with "the school's emphasis on career building at the expense of research"<sup>5</sup> and an insistence on the school's administration that he "...crank out more and more big paintings, as I became obsessed with looking more deeply into the relationship between the maker and the viewer."<sup>6</sup> This obsession led Duncan to study the work of playwright Jerzy Grotowsky, particularly his notion of a 'poor theater': that is to say, a theater in which the relationship between actor and audience was the guiding element of the presentation, rather than the spectacular visual elements which strove to raise theater to the level of media (TV and film) which were imparting a wholly different message. In a notable parallel to the aesthetic which Duncan would later develop, Grotowsky employed all-black stage sets and insisted that "by gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc."<sup>7</sup> However, unlike television or film, it could not exist "without the spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, communion."<sup>8</sup>

Duncan's involvement in the arts did not, from the outset, involve sound- in a career which involved such startling levels of intimacy, though, it was inevitable that sound would become an integral component, given its need to emanate from

a source existing 'here and now,' and its relationship to the listener always having something to do with present actuality. Eventually, the musically-untrained artist would gravitate towards sound together with a circle of individuals –the Los Angeles Free Music Society- who cheerfully declared themselves “the lowest form of music,” a claim which would also be trumpeted across the Pacific by Masami Akita of Merzbow. The activities of the LAFMS ranged from Le Forte Four’s comical breakdowns, electronically-enhanced sound poems and good-natured synthesizer abuse to Airway’s overloaded, aggressive take on free improv (LAFMS founders Rick Potts, Joe Potts, Tom Potts and Chip Chapman participated in both groups, incidentally.) Duncan also formed the cassette label AQM [All Questions Music], whose first releases included recordings of his Reichian breathing exercises and an ambient recording taken inside a car being driven on a mountain road. The group CV Massage would also come into being in Los Angeles, its membership including Duncan as a drummer alongside Michael LeDonne-Bhennet, Dennis Duck, Paul McCarthy, Fredrik Nilsen and Tom Recchion- the group’s sole live performance involved a ‘solo’ turn by Duncan performing on a jackhammer, which was sent careening dangerously throughout the performance space. The jubilant anarchy of the LAFMS was, by all accounts, a unique chapter in the city’s musical history, although Duncan would come to embrace wholly different concepts of music entirely.

By Duncan’s own admission, the formative experience of being raised in a strict Calvinist household –where rigidity of character and denial of emotional expression were the rule- informed at least some of this work, which boldly explores the emotional responses to human contact and the materiality of phenomena like sound, something which has been thought to have a solely ‘ethereal’ existence. Duncan magnifies the fundamental aspects of human communication to a point which can become, for the unprepared, genuinely terrifying- but unlike many of the current crop of derivative ‘shock’ artists, he has made a habit of not trying to reproduce terror for its own sake, instead suggesting that projection and simulation of threshold situations are learning experiences for artist and audience alike. Duncan’s one-time means of employment was one such set of experiences, which he describes as

“...the closest I've been to a war situation, in South Central Los Angeles. I was driving a city bus. All the other drivers who were driving that line or driving in that general area at the same time, which was midnight to six in the morning, had weapons of some kind. They carried guns, they carried knives, they carried meter-long chains that they could use as a whip. I didn't carry anything at all. They were always getting into trouble. The most extreme example was a driver on a line that was parallel to mine. He got cut in half by barbed wire. Someone came on the bus and sort of came up behind him, looped the barbed wire around him and used it like

a saw. People were threatening me all the time, every 15-20 minutes, all night, every night, all through the year.”<sup>9</sup>

Although Duncan never attempted to assail his audience in the same exact manner that his bus fares did to him, the general aura of confrontation and risk has pervaded much of his work. Experience with such a constant, elevated level of threat can be a crucible for those who survive it; Duncan himself relates how a strategy of ‘absorption,’ rather than retaliation, made this survival possible:

“I learned that if I ever carried something, I would attract someone who was more desperate than I was, and wanted me to test him. By not having anything, by not carrying a weapon, I managed... I carried psychology. I would listen to people, show them respect, and be ready to move out of the way as best I could if they lunged at me. It turned out that in just about every case, that was what they really needed most. This was the most effective tool for dealing with these situations.”<sup>10</sup>

Not all the experiences on Duncan’s bus route proved so easy to overcome- one such harrowing experiences is alluded to on the 1981 *Creed 7*” release, one of Duncan’s earliest recordings to be pressed to vinyl. An unsettling piece on the record’s B-side, ironically entitled “Happy Homes”, features Duncan in conversation with the L.A.-area radio therapist Toni Grant. Duncan discusses an incident when he witnessed two adult bus fares dragging a 6-month old baby in a pillowcase behind them, and recalls the initial shock that led him to call the police. If this is not disconcerting enough, there is a follow-up incident:

“I saw something similar to that about 3 weeks ago, and...did absolutely nothing about it. This time, the child was about 9 [years], and her mother was blind, and...the child had open sores covering her arms and legs, every part of the body I could see that was exposed. This time I didn’t call the police, I just drove, and didn’t do anything about it. That is why I’m calling. I just feel completely numb, and that has me very worried.”<sup>11</sup>

Immediately, the vulnerability and uncertainty expressed by Duncan on this recording sets itself apart from the would-be confrontational megalomania evidenced on other “Industrial” recordings of the same period. Unlike artists whose work saw its potency diluted by a sort of historical and geographical distancing from personal experience –lyrical fixations on the Third Reich, for example- Duncan denies us the possibility of escaping into the myth that cruelty

is the exclusive property of some possessed dictator in a faraway land. The “Happy Homes” dialogue reveals that such taboos as wanton abuse against the powerless are, unfortunately, universal- not confined to mythical conflicts that reach definite historical conclusions. During his Los Angeles period, Duncan would return to this theme at least once more, with an almost clandestine installation –*The Black Room* (alternately titled *If Only We Could Tell You*)- set in a fleabag hotel. *The Black Room* conjured up the claustrophobia engendered by societal powerlessness: within the jet-black painted space, an electric sander was placed out of sight behind a closet door, which it violently rattled, at once simulating a child’s convulsive fear of violence and the violent act itself. Across from this was a single typed page bearing countless repetitions of “*we hate you little boy*” and “*DIE DIE DIE*” complemented by such hallmarks of verbal abuse as “*We taught you everything you know...we always knew you’d be ungrateful*” and “*Look at all the horror...every bit of it is your fault.*” It seems that creative acts of such stark potency are not done just as optional exercises in understanding the vicissitudes of human nature, but as compulsory means of abreactive therapy.

Duncan’s willingness to amplify the painful events localized within his own body and mind has earned him a reputation, somewhat unfairly, as a “masochist.” But such a term would insist that Duncan receives an erotic charge from his voluntary endurance tests, and this is not always the case, even though he admits that “both ecstasy and suffering are two major components in my life.”<sup>12</sup> If anything, his more frightening works are informed by an educational imperative more than they are guided by the pleasure principle: Duncan repeatedly stresses in interviews that he wishes for performances to be a transformative experience for both performer and audience, not merely a matter of generating catharsis through shock: “the whole idea of doing all this work is to set up a situation where at least I learned something. Hopefully the other participant learned something too, but I set these things up so that others can learn something from them.”<sup>13</sup>

With these things in mind, it’s necessary to touch on one of Duncan’s most critically dissected works, *Blind Date*. Although the media’s lust for sensationalism guarantees that *Blind Date* is often discussed to the detriment of understanding Duncan’s numerous other works, its story does need to be recounted here for the unfamiliar. Duncan’s period of American performance came to a dramatic close with this 1980 performance piece, and he states that the reactions to it “made it impossible for me to show art in public in the United States... that was one of several reasons why I left the United States in the first place.”<sup>14</sup> Contemporaneous reactions to *Blind Date* were limited to a couple of obscure magazine reviews, although the work has since taken on a near-mythical importance (which has not always gone hand-in-hand with an understanding of the piece’s motivation and implications.) Even requests to *initiate* the action in the first place resulted in physical violence (Duncan’s being

ejected from L.A.-area sex shops), since the centerpiece of the performance was to be sex performed on a cadaver. Duncan was eventually able to bribe a mortician's assistant in Tijuana to provide the corpse, into which Duncan would spend his "last potent seed" before returning to the Los Angeles Center for Birth Control and having a vasectomy performed as the piece's *coup de grace*. Audio was recorded of the act, and some visual evidence of Duncan's vasectomy – as shot by Paul McCarthy- survives as well.

Duncan's caveat to a 1997 clarification of the piece's intentions – "*think of me as you will*"- acknowledges and accepts the, at best, mixed reaction to this work. In discussion with Takashi Asai, the editor of Tokyo's culture magazine *Dice Talk* and head of the Uplink publishing company, Duncan reiterates how *Blind Date* was a cleansing act of simultaneous destruction and rebirth, meant as the logical conclusion to an experience which was already having a deleterious effect on the artist:

Asai: In your commentary you wrote that '*I want to inflict punishment on myself*', but are you masochistic?

Duncan: No, I'm not masochistic. In order to discuss this action, it's necessary to discuss the fact that, at this time (1980), I lost a great love of mine. Even though I loved her immensely, in the end it was impossible to make her happy. For this reason I wanted to inflict punishment on myself.

Asai: So punishing yourself was the intention of the work?

Duncan: In America at the time, the masculinity of white male society was completely defended through penis worship. However, I became aware of the superficiality of this kind of thinking, and my thought was totally altered by this experience with the loss of a loved one. Another factor like this: I've been living in Japan for several years. Japan was a completely unknown country- living in a country with an inflexible societal structure, where I did not know how to speak my mind or communicate through reading or writing, I became all too aware of the narrowness of my thinking and way of seeing things, and thought that I must create irreversible works in order to achieve a more universal viewpoint.<sup>15</sup>

So, in the end, *Blind Date* was meant to be only one in an ongoing series of radically re-configuring actions, rather than a stand-alone act of willful violence perpetrated on the self (or on the passive, deceased 'partner' in this case.) The problematic part of the whole presentation remains not Duncan's voluntary

vasectomy, but the use of an unwilling participant prior to that: this is especially curious since the hue and cry over *Blind Date* came not from a religiously-inclined conservative base, but from a largely secular art world. Such people would not normally subscribe to concepts of an immortal soul, something that would be a prerequisite of a situation in which a still-existing ethereal intelligence is aware of its former mortal shell being violated. So, even in isolated incidents where the work was violently rejected, Duncan can still be said to have succeeded in teaching people about themselves- in this case, that a private belief in post-mortem consciousness lay buried beneath the publicly presented personae of certain secular, existential individuals. While critical rejection of *Blind Date* was damning in and of itself, just as bad is the misinterpretation by those who *accept* the work because of a misperceived 'ghoulish' and inhumane quality: assorted misanthropes hoping to tie the work in with the world of 'snuff' films and sadistic strains of pornography, all the while conveniently ignoring any explanation by Duncan himself and relying largely on 2<sup>nd</sup>-hand accounts. Laboring under the delusion that any artwork offending the sheepish majority must be good, many failed to grasp that 'offending' with stark death imagery was never the *raison d'être* of *Blind Date*.

This is not to say, however, that Duncan shows no interest in human mortality and its widely varying complement of effects on those still living. Speaking on a fellow sound installation artist, Duncan shows that he is not the only one in his field to have used real human remains as a catalyst for some kind of psycho-spiritual transformation, and that others have even used such materials as aesthetic devices:

"Right now, one of my favorite artists is someone who I don't know if she was really trained as an artist- her name is Teresa Margolles. She comes from Mexico City, and...her art is based on her experiences working as a forensics technician at the Mexico City medical examiner's office. What she does is she prepares human bodies for autopsies- she performs autopsies as well, and her art is all about that- the human body and the spirit of the deceased. For example, making situations where you walk into a big room and it's filled with soap bubbles. And as you're moving through the room, these soap bubbles are sort of alighting on you and exploding. And then you find out that the fat used to make this soap is actually human fat. There was another [exhibit] where we met, actually- she had sound coming from these 4 speakers in this little white cube that she built. There was one open entrance, and the one thing you saw there besides the speakers was this framed A4 page, that you had to walk through this little cubicle to read. And when you got there and read it, you realized that the sound was of an autopsy being performed. Then you looked down and realized that you were



walking through this white powder, which was human bone. And when you walked out, you noticed that there were these paths / footprints of white powder going away- the powder from these human bones was being traced all throughout this entire hall.”<sup>16</sup>

Duncan explains that, on occasion, Margolles has used unmistakable remnants of the dead –for example, the tattooed skin of a boy killed in a Mexico City gang fight. However, more recently she has “...gotten much more abstract- you see something and don’t realize that it has some connection to human corporeal existence. You see a cement bench and it doesn’t occur to you to think like that.”<sup>17</sup> Continuing along these lines, Duncan says that

“I see this, to an extent, as risky territory, because she risks getting into an area that’s so abstract, it really doesn’t make a difference if the elements she’s using come from the same source. After a while, it might not make a difference. If she loses that, it would be a big loss- she’d have to come up with something quite powerful to make up for it, and I can’t imagine what it might be.”<sup>18</sup>

The impossibility of placing a work like *Blind Date* into any convenient subdivision of the performing arts has led to comparisons with artists like Paul McCarthy and Chris Burden, with these two artists at least sharing the same geographical confines as Duncan. Comparisons between the work of Duncan and the New York-based artist Vito Acconci, who has also worked heavily with sound in his installations –most often the unprocessed sound of his distinctive gravelly voice- occasionally arise as well, and in some instances, similar territory is being explored. In their ‘performance’ phases in the 1970s, both conducted experiments attempting to discover what it must be like to be of an opposite gender, and both allowed audiences opportunities to possess, harass, or abuse the artist: one piece of Acconci’s involved a standing long jump contest in which any participant defeating him could win a date with one of two female acquaintances, while Duncan’s *For Women Only* involved showing collaged pornographic films with a banal sound component of television snippets to an exclusively female audience, who were invited after the screening to “abuse [Duncan] sexually.” However, the choice of performance arena is one of the greatest differences between the two, and one which has perhaps vindicated Acconci while leading to heated arguments over whether or not Duncan is simply a petty criminal or provocateur. With the exception of his famous 1969 *Follow* piece (in which Acconci stalked total strangers through the city until they entered an enclosed space, and then mailed notes about his targets to other members of the arts community) most of Acconci’s more confrontational performance work took place within the confines of a gallery atmosphere.

By comparison, Duncan repeatedly carried out actions on the streets of Los Angeles, and in public spaces that were unlikely to attract only people with a knowledge of performance and body art- his 1976 *Bus Ride* saw him, on two separate occasions, pouring fish extract into the ventilation system of a city bus with locked windows, attempting to see if the resulting odor's olfactory similarity to sexual excretions would effect passengers. In both cases, riotous and astonishing acts of violence resulted from the bus fares. Elsewhere, Duncan's 1978 piece *Every Woman* saw him returning to a street that he had surveyed the previous night "as himself", returning the next night dressed as a woman in order to experience the fear of possible assault.

Then there was *Scare*, a piece tangentially linked by art critics to Chris Burden's works thanks to common iconography (in this case, a fired handgun is shared between *Scare* and Burden's *Shoot*- although it should be noted that the gunman firing on Burden in the latter piece did not intend for the bullet to find its mark.) Duncan's comrade CM von Hauswolff has deftly noted that it should be considered a 'sound piece', since the firing of blanks from a pistol at point blank range provided an unequivocally sonic dimension to the piece. In fact, Von Hauswolff's observation could be applied to a good deal of performance art (especially that of the stereotypically confrontational kind.) It is somewhat disappointing to consider reviews where the sound component in these pieces is barely mentioned, although there are exhaustive descriptions of the visible destruction wrought over the course of certain performances. *Blind Date* itself was staged as a 'sound' piece in which audio of Duncan's infamous act was played before a Los Angeles gallery audience. Lest it seem like the hostility towards Duncan following this event is exaggerated, it is important to give him the final word on this:

"Several of my closest friends tried to arrange for me to be extradited to Mexico and arrested on necrophilia charges. When that effort proved to be legally formidable, they decided to threaten anyone publishing or showing my work with boycotts, which effectively banned my work in the US for several years. With other friends, it created a sense of separation, a wall that in some cases still remains. I felt, and was, abandoned by every one of the people I felt closest to. Some claimed that the cadaver had been raped, that the fact that the body was apparently Mexican meant that my action was racist, the fact that the body was female meant that the action was sexist, etc., etc., to the point of surreal comedy. This was an important lesson. It taught me that each of us has a psychic limit. When something puts sudden stress on that limit and has no apparent context we can use to 'frame' it, we instinctively resist. Because our resistance isn't based on reason, any attempt we

make to try to explain our resistance logically, or morally, will sound absurd, just as these claims of rape, racism or sexism were and are absurd. At the same time, it's as real as anything else, so it's just as absurd to criticize anyone with such a limit as being personally or socially 'weak'.”<sup>19</sup>

## **Underground, Rooftop and Ether: Ascending in Tokyo**

All of this interaction with the particularly vast, American strains of fear, violence and sexual anxiety was soon to come to a close, once an invite to Japan initiated a number of shifts in the locus of the artist's activity. As suggested in the previous dialogue with Asai, Duncan's relocation to Japan was fraught with revelatory experiences and, as is often the case, numerous misunderstandings as well. A man by the name of Takuya Sakaguchi was the initial contact for Duncan in Japan, a biologist studying, as Duncan recalls, “higher nervous energy, which is how the Japanese title translates ...the connections between the locus sirius neuron and the visual cortex.”<sup>20</sup> This research was carried out with the eventual goal of increasing human memory through the growth of brain cells. Sakaguchi's day job, with its emphasis on fostering some form of biological growth, conveniently merged into his interest in self-produced sound art. After first hearing Duncan on the 1979 *Organic* LP released through AQM, Sakaguchi began a letter-writing campaign that would provide the germ for Duncan's eventual arrival in Japan in 1982, once the fallout from *Blind Date* had made further Stateside developments too difficult.

The expatriate artist's local influence would expand significantly throughout the 1980s- this is evidenced by a number of collaborative concerts or record releasing efforts with groups like Hijokaidan, Toshiji Mikawa (also of Incapacitants), Chie Mukai and O'Nancy in French. All of these individuals were, and still are, firmly planted in the underground, but –if high online auction prices of their recordings are anything to go by- are now venerated as the brave, lonely souls whose diligence made broader developments in visceral expression possible. Like Sakaguchi, most of these individuals were tied to day jobs apparently mundane in comparison with their anarchic, colorful musical output. Toshiji Mikawa remains, as of this writing, a section chief in a Tokyo bank, while other members of Hijokaidan were described by Duncan as

“...a housewife, a secretary and an office worker...Hijokaidan is known for their performances, where one of the women who does vocals will also do actions like pissing on stage, or shitting on stage, and the rest of the members will sort of move around on the stage after this...*in* this...and play homemade electronics, and in

the process destroy these homemade electronics. And, as I said before, when I introduce Hijokaidan, people who are not familiar with their gigs when they first see them are rather skeptical that these people are office workers that they're looking at on the stage. But then when they start playing, they shut up, and listen, and, well...change their minds, we hope."<sup>21</sup>

During the 1980s, not many Japanese artists would equal Hijokaidan's propensity for showmanship, which simultaneously showered audiences in humor and terror. Duncan would respond in kind with performances of his own, though- performance pieces like *Move Forward* (1984) featured about 20 minutes of massive, tangible sound output in the darkened, concrete 'Plan B' space in Tokyo, accompanied with film collage –of war atrocities, S+M ritual etc.- being projected onto a paper screen which covered basically the entire visual space of the forward-facing audience, since the projection screen stretched from ceiling to floor and from the left wall to the right. In an unmistakably climactic moment, this screen would be set ablaze by Duncan at the end of the film portion, its fire-consumed remnants sprayed into the audience with a fire extinguisher. Like the earlier *Secret Film*, here was another piece that ended in fiery destruction, continuing Duncan's interest in the elemental- the final destruction of the projection surface, after being used for such an overload of provocative imagery, could on one hand suggest a return to a *tabula rasa* in sorts, an 'unlearning' or transcending of aggressive impulses. Then again, blasting the audience with the remnants of the projection surface could be seen as another none-too-subtle hint that some residue of these primal destructive urges would always be with them, flying back into their faces when least expected.

Actions like the above, which featured a level of un-compromise at least on par with the actions Duncan carried out in the U.S., need to be put in some sort of geographical and historical framework. If they do not seem particularly jarring to jaded veterans of 21<sup>st</sup> century information overload and post-'9/11' nihilism, we must remember that the mid-1980s were an unparalleled period of economic prosperity for Japan. The era of the *endama* –powerful yen, or yen appreciation- was about to begin, and according to one retrospective article on Japan's '80s prosperity,

"Japan's per capita income hit \$17,500 a year- second highest in the world. Land values soared. A square foot of Tokyo real estate sold for the equivalent of \$2,000; a simple wood frame home for 1.5 million dollars. Japan's Economic Planning Agency calculated that the market value of the nation itself, a California-sized archipelago, was four times greater than that of the U.S." <sup>22</sup>

Just like the rise of Beat poetry in 1950s America, oppositional aesthetics in such a culture of easy convenience and economic dominance (Japan was also the world's #1 creditor nation at the time) would have seemed ridiculous to the rank-and-file 'salaryman' or 'OL [office lady]'. This is to say nothing of their elders, who, even if they found this culture rampantly materialistic, found it vastly preferable to a state of total war. Defenders of Japan's mainstream culture could even argue that its market power was what allowed these contrarian activities in the first place: since everything else was so readily provided for her citizens, the existence of some fringe elements displaying a kind of *Nippon Aktionismus* 'proved' the robust health, flexibility and all-inclusive nature of the dominant culture. This is true, if only to a certain extent: a good deal of young Japanese from the time lived rent-free with family members (and a sizable number still do today.) With such disposable income on hand, consumption of cultural materials became a choice way to spend this surplus cash: copious amounts of books, magazines, and comics were needed for daily train rides, while large numbers of LPs and cassettes were necessary to enhance cramped home life and to keep current with one's peer group, who more often than not kept meticulous and status-defining checklists of "must have" media. The ability to consume more media in a smaller amount of time would often turn into curiosity about more 'exotic' flavors of culture, and so the door was open to things like Hijokaidan, Merzbow, and John Duncan- if one's tracking instincts were sharp enough.

But increased spending power and unprecedented diversity in consumer choices was only one side of the story, and at any rate, simple *availability* of radical culture and media did not equal broad-based *acceptance* of its content. At best, the ongoing saga of groups like Hijokaidan was carried out in tiny capsule reviews at the rear pages of magazines like *Fool's Mate* and *Rock Magazine*, who would cover the *noizu-kei* [noise movement] phenomenon less in the 1990s and 2000s than in the 1980s, even as concert performance and releasing activity in that corner of the underground multiplied exponentially. At any rate, having a safe existence as a contributor to a massively affluent society was not enough to satisfy all people all the time: this often brought with it intense levels of fatigue (as evidenced from the large numbers of napping businessmen on home-bound subway trains), and unsustainable levels of hyper-competition. There was also an alienation from the forces of nature, an appreciation of which was so vital to earlier manifestations of Japanese culture. Meanwhile, Japan's status of relative cultural isolation and insularity made the various escape routes into other cultures –such as learning second languages– more difficult than usual, and certainly too time-consuming to attempt while already spending one's days at the office and nights at the *karaoke* bar in moments of compulsory camaraderie. While it was actually cheaper in the 1980s to spend one's slim allotment of vacation time abroad in Australia than within Japan proper, long-term involvements in other nations were not as common, which often made the

appearance in Japan of a figure like John Zorn or John Duncan a welcome ‘fly in the ointment’ catalyst for new cultural developments.

One notable feature common to most of Japan’s ‘outsider culture’ denizens was their visual similarity to members of the Japanese mainstream: plenty of neat, short haircuts, and indistinct, conservative fashions were to be found among the genuine radicals and perverts. This was in part a necessity, something that allowed people to slip into their underground mode without having to explain themselves to suspicious co-workers. This was also just another rejection of the prevailing materialism, which had spawned countless visually-oriented culture tribes: rigidly defined cliques of brightly-plumed yet harmless youth whose status as living street-corner sculpture was their main cultural contribution. Such cliques would insist that professional musicians need to be marked by special coordinated outfits, handed down by the editors of the premiere Tokyo style guides. But groups like Hijokaidan were the ambassadors of a new anti-professionalism, not “musicians” as the general populace in Japan would have understood the word- as such, there was no set uniform for makers of underground *Gesamtkunstwerk*, performance art or other impossible-to-categorize forms of unmediated expressiveness.

Pockets of resistance –or at least pockets of people who acknowledged and attempted to examine their own ‘outsider’ status- sprung up not only in the culture of free noise and Industrial music, but also in the ‘alternative’ comics scene rotating around weekly magazines like *Garō* and the willfully crude (but not inarticulate) comic artist / essayist Takeshi Nemoto. Direct collaboration between the two scenes seems to have been rare, but both persistently attempted to confront base instincts with the intent of reaching higher eloquence and awareness beyond the glossy but insubstantial artifice of consumer lifestyles. Nemoto’s description of his comics as “propagating like the graffiti you find on a toilet stall” was interesting, especially considering men’s toilet stalls were the precise ‘exhibition space’ of Duncan’s 1985 collection of A1-size collage posters. Like the alternately discomfiting and arousing materials used for *Move Forward*, Duncan’s collages of war imagery and exaggerated pornography were not what anyone had expected to see greeting them in an immaculately well-tended Japanese public restroom, where grooming rituals and maintenance of professional appearance were carried out just as much as the less noble acts of urination and defecation. The posters were placed in Tokyo’s epicenters of fashion (Shibuya), finance (Hibiya), government (KokkaiGijidomae), and entertainment (Shinjuku)- with this strategic placement, Duncan’s simple act hinted that, if the present technological and materialistic utopia was not *built* on primal lusts and aggressive impulses, these things were certainly not absent from it.

Actions like the above were not as common as Duncan's musical performances, which were done both solo and in collaboration. Takuya Sakaguchi claims that "the number of shows that John did during that short stay in Japan were not small",<sup>23</sup> and whatever this exact number may have been, doing just a monthly concert would have been an ambitious undertaking without the proper connections: 'pay to play' policies in Japanese clubs have traditionally priced regular performance schedules outside the range of all but the most dedicated musicians, often forcing the usage of alternate spaces like record shops and cafes.

A 'no bullshit', 'get down to business' attitude was not confined to the Japanese underground musicians' unadorned physical appearance during live performances, but it was also manifested in their choice of sound creation devices, themselves a world away from the dazzling new array of electronic instruments being churned out in Yamaha and Roland workshops. Incapacitants and Hijokaidan had their short-lived, homemade "black box" electronics, while O'Nancy in French created and controlled feedback from amplified oil barrels. For Duncan, shortwave radio was the instrument of choice: a highly portable tool which resisted an user's manipulative movements as much as it accepted them, and which was capable of an extensive dynamic range of sound for those who were willing to hear the musical qualities and rhythmic structures arising from a panoply of hums, crackles, static blasts, and plaintive coded signals. Although he had already been using shortwave during his with the Los Angeles Free Music Society, its use really 'came into its own' (in my humble opinion) during the Japan years.

The shortwave radio was an interesting choice merely for its historical resonance: in the same way that the tiny cell structure of underground music was the support of giant media conglomerates unnecessary in order to participate in the shaping of culture, Guglielmo Marconi's brainchild made it unnecessary to have the princely sums of money necessary for longwave transmitters and giant antennae, also opening the communicative floodgates much like the internet would, some 70 years in advance. The difficulty of censoring shortwave broadcasts and monitoring listeners' access to these broadcasts also gives it some distinct advantages over the latter medium. Duncan claims that, during his stay in Japan, he was staying awake until almost sunrise drinking coffee and making shortwave compositions, fascinated by the fact that

"...it's always different, shortwave is never the same twice when you turn it on from night to night, you don't hear the same things ever. And I'm not talking about the regular stations, I'm talking about the events between the stations- that was where shortwave

really got interesting- it was always unique, always different, and the human voice is [also] like that.”<sup>24</sup>

Even though Duncan adopted shortwave for such aleatory qualities, it has uncannily adapted itself to his personality and his own artistic intentions: the results that he achieves with the shortwave radio cannot be easily compared to, say, the work of AMM’s Keith Rowe with the same device. Rowe’s subtle and almost cautious approach to this tool parallels the aesthetic he developed with tabletop guitar, while Duncan uses the instrument in a way that, like much of his other work, rewards concentrated, high-volume listening of the recorded results. Rowe also became a recognized ‘virtuoso’ of shortwave by his ability to maximize the serendipitous power of the instrument (suddenly finding broadcast voices which seemed to comment on AMM’s improvisations as they were happening.) Duncan was, as he has stated above, more concerned with the interstices: in his hands the shortwave radio was not so much a medium for transmitting human communications as it was for transmitting the sound of atmospheric disturbances and galactic forces greater than what normally fell into our immediate field of comprehension. The sound artist / composer Michael Prime, who performs using a ‘bioactivity translator’ (a device which amplifies the fluctuating voltage potentials or bioelectric signals inherent in all natural life) has written simply, but eloquently, on the larger implications of harnessing shortwave transmissions as an expressive tool:

“Shortwave signals interpenetrate our bodies at all times, and provide a vast musical resource. The signals may originate from cosmic sources, such as the sun, pulsars, and quasars, or from human sources. However, they are all modified and inter-modulated by the earth’s own nervous system, the magnetic particles that surround the planet like layers of onion. These layers expand and contract under the influence of weather systems [...] to produce complex patterns of manipulation.”<sup>25</sup>

More fascinating than any of this, though, is the way in which these forces have combined to produce signature sonic elements whose source is largely taken for granted. Prime continues:

“Many of the characteristic effects of electronic music (such as ring modulation, filtering, phase-shifting and electronic drone textures) were first heard in the interaction of radio broadcasts with the earth’s magnetic layers. Perhaps Gaia was the first composer of electronic music.”<sup>26</sup>



Such sentiments have inspired a whole micro-movement within the music detailed in this book, populated by artists like Swiss ‘cracked electronics’ duo Voice Crack and the exacting Bay Area sound artist Scott Arford, whose hyper-real compositions tend to straddle the ‘concrete’ and ‘abstract’ divide. It also has to be admitted that, as far as instruments go, the shortwave is an incredibly versatile producer of sound textures for the price- like most sound generators that are incapable of producing melodic music, it relies on variation in other audible phenomena: the thickness in the distortion of its signal, the velocity of its crackling and chirping noises, and the randomness in the attenuation of otherwise constant electrical hum. The shortwave functions both as a tool for personal enlightenment and amusement, as well as being a metaphor for the challenges we face in making meaningful communication, beset on all sides by countless forms of natural and human interference: at least this is the feeling one gets when listening to Duncan’s shortwave-based pieces like *Riot* and *Trinity*, dense and occasionally opaque manifestations of elemental sound.

Radio would become a productive tool in Duncan’s hands in more ways than one, though, as he also set out to make pirate broadcasts of events that would likely never make it onto commercial Japanese radio (and, to this day, still haven’t.) His pirate radio program *Radio Code* was the kind of thing which, given its superior ability to investigate and document street-level reality when compared to the mass media, calls into question the concept of “amateurism”. Although *Radio Code* was broadcast using no more than a Walkman, a transmitter with a 7km range, and a stereo microphone with earphones taped to it (this allowed for music to be played from the Walkman while “talking over” it as a typical radio DJ might), the sheer eclecticism of the sonic art it presented was well beyond the scope of other media outlets in the area. A radical fusion of precious unheard music, social commentary and fairly innocent playfulness was employed: highlights included on-location broadcasts of Chie Mukai’s band Che Shizu and O’Nancy in French, an audio portrait of an attempted suicide (recorded live from her home after hospitalization), and an episode of the show given over to some enthusiastic high-schoolers. The title of a Hafler Trio cassette culled from a broadcast on *Radio Code -Hotondo Kiki Torenai* [something you haven’t heard before]- accurately summed up the refreshing nature of the technically simple, yet journalistically sophisticated, approach.

Infiltrating the world of radio, holding deafening live sound performances, serving as a core member in an expanding circle of dissatisfied urban primitives: these accomplishments could have been enough on their own, but Duncan did not limit himself even to these things, branching out into film and television production as well. His *John See* series of erotic / pornographic films may be some of the only films from the era (1986-1987) to involve a non-Japanese director at the helm. Duncan became involved in this medium with the assistance of Nobuyuki

Nakagawa, a protégé of the avant-garde filmmaker Shuji Terayama. Needless to say, the results were an unorthodox based on collaged images (similar to the kind previously used in *Move Forward*) rather than the linear, clumsy attempts at ‘acting’ and ‘narrative’ that most porn films attempted. The *John See* soundtracks, likewise, were a world removed from the silly synthesizer percolations and ersatz funk typically scored for mild pornographic fare. Looped orgasmic noises, treated with electronics, gave the impression of being adrift and weightless in some limbo of carnal desire (see the piece *Breath Choir Mix*), while other soundtrack segments heightened erotic tension through ambient rumble and vaguely familiar, low-pitched rustlings and murmurings (*Inka, Aida Yuki Passion*.) Duncan’s experiences within this corner of Japanese society featured human interactions significantly different than the ones portrayed in modern-day cautionary fables: rather than descending into a slimy netherworld of the type scripted into Hollywood docu-dramas, populated by Yakuza bosses, drug-addicted runaways and unfeeling nymphomaniacs, Duncan’s colleagues on the filming set were reportedly very pleasant, and diversified in their reasons for working in adult films [for the sake of not repeating myself, readers should refer to the ‘Pornoise’ section of the chapter on Merzbow for further details on these encounters.]

Meanwhile, Duncan’s pirate TVC 1 station –broadcast on the frequency of the state-operated NHK after their ‘signing off’ time- was a small victory for guerrilla media in an environment which increasingly accorded advertising as much importance as regular ‘entertainment’ programming. TVC 1 also functioned as a sort of companion piece to *Radio Code*. Fans of the media hijacking made so popular by the ‘cyberpunk’ genre (not least because Tokyo was the staging ground for the seminal writing in that genre) would find Duncan’s actions positively romantic: a lone insurrectionary broadcasting from Tokyo rooftops with equipment that could fit securely into a single briefcase (antenna, transmitter and all), melting into the night and the nearest subway train before his location could be targeted by the authorities. Yet, for all this cool anti-hero romanticism, TVC 1 was less concerned with any kind of “fucking up the system” as it was with merely filling the gaps in what people were able to perceive through a broadcast medium: to wit, the station never interfered with any official NHK programming, and as such could project itself as an alluring alternative rather than as a chaotic interruption for its own sake. The intent was to be an ‘additive’ rather than subtractive form of communication- and among the additions made to Japanese culture were things which likely had never been seen in the whole of Asia: footage of Aktionist artist Rudolf Schwarzkogler, for one. Shaky production values merely contributed to the images’ sense of otherness, as did the broadcasting of material whose originators had probably intended for it to remain private: play with a videocamera by a couple enjoying themselves after sex, or an ‘accidental’ set of artful visuals filmed by an electrical engineer in a small apartment.

## Dutch Courage

The next major port of call for Duncan was Amsterdam, a place buzzing with possibility for artistic cross-pollination, and also a place far removed from the workaholic confines of Tokyo, whose full spectrum audio-visual overload nonetheless concealed a deep-seated social conservatism. The Amsterdam of the mid '80s-mid '90s was home to the adventurous Staalplaat / Staaltape record label, and a plethora of pirate radio stations, squats, and other unpredictable flare-ups of cultural autonomy. According to Staalplaat member Erik Hobijn, such activities spun off of a more hectic in the dawn of the 1980s, when the squatters' movement regularly engaged police forces in street combat. Hobijn also reports that

“The squatters did some pretty heavy actions. They broke into security places, stole computer files and published them, broke into police files and published them- they had their own magazines to expose all kinds of hot news [...] The squatters are generally horrible- very dogmatic. But in another way it was unbelievable, we had two years of riots just for *fun*, starting around the day the new Queen appeared.”<sup>27</sup>

The smoke from these skirmishes had more or less cleared by the time of Duncan's arrival, but the heady underground violence of the early 1980s had helped to lay the foundations for one of Europe's most consistently rewarding creative environments. Claiming to end up in Amsterdam “by chance, as far as that concept goes,” Duncan soon found himself part of another unique constellation of sound artists: one which has not been replicated to this day, and seems unlikely to do so anytime in the near future. Since Duncan's departure from the U.S. owed itself to friction between himself and the arts community there, his exit from Japan tempts one to imagine scenarios of a daring escape from arresting authorities or shady underworld elements with a definite ax to grind. The real sequence of events surrounding his next major move, though, is less theatrical than this: with his Japanese wife of the time transferring to Amsterdam to work for the European branch of a Tokyo-based company, Duncan had the chance to follow along, did so, and that is that.

Relocation to the Netherlands was perhaps not as much of a dive into stark unfamiliarity as the Japan relocation, and it had the effect of solidifying a number of relations that had already begun in Japan, while steadily forging new

connections. Z'ev, a.k.a. Stefan Weisser, the mystically-inclined metal percussionist and text-sound artist (who, like Duncan, also attended CalArts), was possibly the first link in the expatriate sound art community living in Amsterdam. If true, this would be another in Z'ev's penchant for "firsts": his *Shake, Rattle and Roll* was the first full-length music video to be commercially released on VHS format, and he was also among the first within the Industrial sub-culture to infuse tribal or 'primitive' motifs into his presentation, emblazoning intricate sigil designs onto his drum heads and swinging sheets of metal about him in a cyclonic, often hazardous dance. Like Duncan, Z'ev settled in the Dutch capital partially due to romantic involvements, in his case with University of Amsterdam professor Dorothea Franck. The sudden accident-related death of a roommate in Z'ev's previous New York loft residence also contributed to his eventual relocation.

Credit should be given to the enigmatic and tireless activity of artist Willem de Ridder, as well: the self-proclaimed "master story-teller" of the Netherlands. De Ridder was named the Fluxus chairman for Northern Europe by Georges Maciunas, and hosted a prodigious number of collaborative organizations whose whimsical titles keep one guessing as to the precise functions they carried out: the "Association for Scientific Research in New Methods of Creation", the "Mood Engineering Society", the "Society for Party Organizing", and the "Witch Identification Project", for starters. The Amsterdam club Paradiso, a vital hub for the continental European tours of independent musicians, was formed in part with de Ridder's assistance, while he labored away on several magazine and broadcast projects. De Ridder's influence on the Northern European underground of non-specialist artists has at least earned him a place on Carl Michael von Hausswolff's *The Wonderful World of Male Intuition* album, whose track listing reads like a who's-who of feted, maverick explorers of the scientific and spiritual: de Ridder's name is listed among perception-benders like Albert Hoffman, Alvin Lucier, John C. Lilly, and Gregory Bateson.

Certain of de Ridder's activities overlapped with Duncan's desire to draw out the latent forms of pure expression within individuals not normally perceived as 'artists': de Ridder's radio show *Radiola Salon* guaranteed air time to virtually anyone who sent in a tape of themselves, not a far cry from Duncan's *Radio Code* experiments. Personal affiliations overlapped to some degree, as well- de Ridder's affair with 'post-porn modernist' and highly sexualized performance artist Annie Sprinkle, and their concurrent desire to transmute their sexual desires into transmittable energy, brought Sprinkle into the orbit of the Hafler Trio's Andrew McKenzie, who himself was involved with Duncan on and off throughout his tenure in Amsterdam (McKenzie also shared a residence with de Ridder at one point.) In fact, a dialogue between McKenzie and de Ridder exists on record under the title *This Glass is a Bicycle*, and some of de Ridder's

personal thoughts on the nature of human suffering are worth re-printing here for the purpose of contrasting them with Duncan's own:

"There's not one single item in the universe which is out to destroy us. It doesn't exist. We can *think* it like that, and it starts to seem like that, but it's only an illusion. So all our suffering is only because we're volunteers there- it's really what we love to do [...] We don't know anything else. In fact we're so used to it, it feels so much like home, that a lot of people get very *angry* when you tell them they don't have to suffer. [They say] 'oh YEAH? Well I'm gonna suffer! It's my RIGHT to suffer!' You know what I mean? [...] And, great, if you want to do it, you should do it. But all of this feels very uncomfortable, because you're actively resisting the laws of nature."<sup>28</sup>

It would seem that, with positive-minded statements such as these, the ebullient de Ridder would be the perfect foil to Duncan, an artist who, if he has not directly welcomed suffering into his life, has not attempted to diminish its value as a kind of evolutionary mechanism. Whatever their differences may be on this issue, the two artists seem to be in agreement about the usefulness of spontaneity, or of ceding control to variables not given pre-set values by the artist. Continuing from his statements above, de Ridder notes the following:

"You see, our training in struggle, and absorbing discomfort on the path to success, encourages us to really plan in advance. We think we have to plan everything. But...we don't know. We really don't know what's going to happen, all the possibilities, we only make stupid decisions [...] So *don't*. You limit yourself tremendously by planning. If you can trust that the universe is a support system, and that all the details are perfectly organized for you better than you could ever organize them yourself, then you [will] lead a fantastic life. [...] All you have to know is *what you want*."<sup>29</sup>

With spritely, good-natured characters like de Ridder presiding over the counter-cultural development of Amsterdam, artistic work done there was bound to have a different flavor to it than that the works accomplished in the blighted war zones of Los Angeles or the insomniac sprawl of Tokyo. Or was it? Amsterdam may have offered a stereotypically 'laid-back' atmosphere in comparison to Duncan's other places of residence, but one side effect of this was ample time for reflection and the conclusion of unfinished business, and for refining earlier ideas within the confines of more professional environments (including recording sessions at Sweelink Academy Electronic Music Studio and the STEIM [Studio for Electro-

Instrumental Music] Laboratories, home of the LiSA real-time audio manipulation and sampling software.) Notably, *Radio Code* broadcasts continued on a weekly basis, occasionally offering exclusive recordings of the Japanese underground to Dutch audiences. In Amsterdam Duncan also composed the pieces *River in Flames* and *Klaar*, which in a way are his signature recorded pieces: most of the sonic elements associated with Duncan are neatly interwoven into these lengthy, exhaustive audio exegeses, a melting down of previous materials which have run their course, ready to be forged yet again into something new. Von Hauswölff describes *River in Flames* in more vivid terms, as “a cleansing piece where nothing was hidden, nothing was obscure, and nothing was veiled. A naked John Duncan puking his past away like an overdosed Lacan on peyote.”<sup>30</sup> It is a *pièce de résistance* of its form, no matter how we choose to describe it: nerve-tingling computerized warning signals, unbearably intimate Janovian primal screaming and time-reversed moaning, indistinct grey ambience heard through solid walls, ecstatic electrical discharge, and the resurgence of Duncan’s shortwave radio...all of these combine to make the penultimate portrait of a world which seems indifferent to our elaborately constructed fictions and histories: the giant coronal mass ejections from the sun humbling our best attempts to communicate with each other across the radio spectrum.

Another key recording during this period was *The Crackling*, done in collaboration with Max Springer and using the linear particle accelerator at Stanford University as the original sound source. Although this particle accelerator’s size now pales in comparison to the mammoth (17 miles in circumference) Large Hadron Collider beneath the French-Swiss border, it is still claimed to be the world’s longest straight-line object: an amusing side note when considering the very ‘non-linear’ way in which Duncan’s art usually proceeds. Also interesting is the fundamental concept behind these gargantuan atom smashers: making larger and more complex structures in order to seek out the infinitesimally small, the particles which would reveal the very secret of the universe’s functioning. The purpose of these vast constructions -probing of dark matter and seeking the universe’s early origins- is neatly analogous to Duncan’s research with the human organism, seeing as it unashamedly seeks out the sources of our inter-personal friction and neuroses, and our own internal ‘*terra incognita*’ or psychological and emotional ‘dark matter’.

Any hope that Duncan’s work, while being based in Amsterdam, would be attenuated in a haze of legalized marijuana smoke and general *laissez faire* ideals was further dashed by installation pieces like *Pressure Chamber*, first enacted in 1993 at the “Absolute Threshold Machine Festival” in Amsterdam (the first major Dutch exhibit of ‘machine art’.) Consisting of a metal shipping container large enough to accommodate humans inside, and with running motors mounted on three of the four container walls, participants in *Stress Chamber* were told to enter the darkened container completely naked, encountering

intense vibrations of a palpable character. Duncan's catalog description of this piece informs us that each motor, equipped with an eccentric flywheel, would cause vibrations at the container's resonant frequency- these fluctuations in vibration created the illusion of the sound being a moving object, another 'body' as it were- no longer just a ghostly presence whose place in the hierarchy of human senses was not as elevated or authentic as the sense of touch.

By this point in Duncan's career, 'touch' is becoming the operative word for nearly all his exhibited and recorded works: and not merely because of his affiliations with a record label of that same name. Sakaguchi's description of Duncan as a 'stimulation artist' begins to really ring true during this time, as both the touching caused by surface / skin contact and the figurative meaning of 'being touched' –having one's emotions stirred and beliefs interrogated- become recognizable as the sutures holding together this complex body of work. Of special interest is the fact that pieces like *Stress Chamber*, involving a solitary individual subjected to the elements, can arouse as diverse a set of physiological and emotional reactions as pieces involving a direct interface between two humans. The latter category would be best exemplified by *Maze*, another Amsterdam-based piece in which participants voluntarily went nude into a basement room, unaware of when they would be released (some flash photos of this exist as documentation, later projected with a shortwave soundtrack.) When all of Duncan's pieces to this point are surveyed and interpreted as a single ongoing project, several categories of 'touched' individuals emerged: the 'touched from a distance' voyeur (as in the *John See* series of films), the direct participant in a corporeal ritual or ordeal, and the artist himself (who is, after all, hoping to learn from these events, whether a satisfactory audience response is generated or not.) What all these myriad forms of contact achieve is to question whether one 'touch' is truly more 'real' than the other; obviously one could respond to physical touch with blank indifference and yet be wildly stimulated by erotic simulacra, and vice versa. To his credit, Duncan does not interject himself into the audience's assessment process by saying things must be otherwise, or that certain reactions are contrary to his work's 'intent.'

## Love In All Forms: Scrutto di San Leonardo, and Beyond

“Around 1987 or so, I was very interested in the musical area dealing with noise (more or less ‘composed’, or at least somehow regulated) and what’s commonly intended as ‘post-industria’. It was right then that I met John Duncan’s music for the first time, instantly remaining fascinated by that sound. It was clearly evident that his pieces communicated to my whole being through something much different than sheer ‘noise’. John’s sonic propagations – even the harshest ones – must be placed in the context of that big vibe upon which life itself is based. There’s an underlying harmony at work, an awareness of phenomena that no word can explain, but upon which we can rely for the betterment of our persona. About ten years later, I was writing for an Italian new music quarterly so I contacted Mike Harding at Touch to see if Duncan was available for an interview. I thought of him as someone who didn’t want to know about stupid things like explaining his art. Imagine my surprise when, fast-forward less than a week, I received a very nice letter from John, who agreed, with an Italian address! The man whose work I admired so much, who I believed to be hidden in some remote arsehole of the world, lived instead near Udine, Italy. When in the interview I asked him why, the reply was ‘Love. In all forms’. That should say everything about the man. Needless to say, he’s one of the nicest, humblest persons that I ever met.”

-Massimo Ricci, *Touching Extremes*<sup>31</sup>

At least one form of love, shared between Duncan and the Italian multi-media artist Giuliana Stefani, prompted yet another relocation, from Amsterdam to the village of Scrutto di San Leonardo along the Italian / Slovenian border. This is not too far (at least by this author’s hopelessly American interpretation of geographic distance) from where the flamboyant warrior poet Gabriele D’annunzio once stormed the city Fiume (now Rijeka, in Croatia) and declared it an autonomous state. The pair of Stefani and Duncan shared a studio in the small hamlet for nearly a decade, a period over which collaborative efforts with other sound artists would cement Duncan’s reputation as an innovator in this medium. CD releases appeared in which Duncan shared lead billing with Elliot Sharp, Asmus Tietchens, Francisco López, Edvard Graham Lewis (of Wire)- his aesthetic increasingly lent itself to collaborations with those who were not afraid to use drones, noise, barely perceptible sonic nuances and unorthodox sound sources to activate all possible regions of the human sensorium. Although not directly



connected with John Duncan, the ecologically oriented Michael Prime again provides some insight into the efforts of this small but potent circle of sound researchers:

“In my music, I try to bring together sounds from a variety of environmental sources into a performance space- particularly sounds which would ordinarily not be audible. I also use live electronic processing to give these sounds new characters, and to enable them to interact in new ways. For instance, traffic sound may be filtered so that it resembles the sound of surf, while actual sea sounds may be transformed to conjure up images of an interstellar dust storm. Electronic processing allows microscopic and macroscopic sounds to interact on an equal basis.”<sup>32</sup>

Prime’s emphasis on microscopic and macroscopic –bypassing the more mundane aspects of our consensus reality- is something which animated much of the music being composed by Duncan and his colleagues during the late 1990s and the dawning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Pieces like *The Crackling*, by virtue of their subject matter and source material, had already managed to tackle life at both the micro and macro level. Meanwhile, affiliates like Mike Harding’s Ash International record label, an offshoot of the slightly more “accessible” Touch, gradually became repositories of audio exploration into phenomena of the kind described by Prime. In the Ash International catalog, CD-length examinations of EVP [electronic voice phenomena, or the occurrence of unknown voices, attributed alternately to spirits or alien intelligence, breaking through radio signals] nestle alongside LPs of hypnotizing tones inspired by Anton Mesmer’s experiments in animal magnetism, intended to induce hypnagogic states. Duncan’s releases on other labels, such as the piece *Change* released on the *Mind of a Missile* compilation on Heel Stone, succeed on their ability to amplify the sounds of an inanimate object -a missile’s guidance system, in this case- which nonetheless was not a ‘neutral’ object when it came to evaluating its usefulness. Ambiguity of technology and malleability of perception came to the fore in pieces like this, where the electronic tones produced were ironically quite gentle and languid -even something to be meditated upon- when considering the sounds originated from a device of such deadly power.

It is interesting to note that, despite working with such inhuman elements in his sound compositions, Duncan did not fully abandon the corporeal as raw material- far from it, in fact. His 1998 piece *Distraction*, in which strips of acetate were smeared with the artist’s blood and set between glass sheets, shows this to be the case, in the most literal sense (the 1998 piece *Specchietto per le Allodole* also involved Duncan’s blood smeared over a rotating cylinder, as seen with a small hole in a gallery wall.) His interactive installation works, meanwhile,

required the audience themselves to submit to a higher-than-usual degree of bodily intimacy and voluntary vulnerability within a public space. Duncan's *Voice Contact* piece, enacted in several locations in Stockholm, Tokyo, and Canada from 1998-2000, was one such example of intense corporeality: this was accomplished by requiring viewers of the piece to strip completely naked and then enter a darkened hotel suite, where a heavy audible drone causes further disorientation and a quiet, beckoning voice is heard offering instructions to move forward (note the echoes of the earlier *Maze* piece.) More recently (in March of 2008) the theme of finding one's way in total darkness was utilized for *The Gauntlet*, in which visitors to the exhibition space were not required to be naked, but were supposed to navigate their way through the space using small penlights- the uncertainty and fragility of this journey into darkness is occasionally amplified by blaring anti-theft alarms triggered by infrared sensors, once again forcing an unmediated and honest reaction along the lines of *Scare*.

The same can be said for his *Keening Towers*, an installation set up outside the Gothenburg Art Museum in 2003. Utilizing the recordings of Duncan conducting a children's choir in Italy, which were then projected from 24-meter tall, galvanized steel towers lording over the museum's entrance (making the piece a sort of 'gauntlet' to be run by museum patrons), the eerie piece is difficult to sever from the realm of emotional resonance; from nearly universal conceptions of purity and the sanctity of childhood. It should be noted that the recording of *Keening Towers* was one instance of Duncan taking on the new role of conductor- another from this period would be his concert appearance conducting the noise-friendly Zeitkratzer orchestra, an event for which the artist was veiled in darkness with the exception of his spotlighted conductor's hands.

Duncan states that *Keening Towers* was done with the purpose of giving his personal 'ghosts' a voice, and indeed this points to a larger attraction to vocal phenomena as a whole. As Duncan says:

"All of the traditional instruments either have their basis in the human voice- either imitating the human voice or accompanying the human voice. The human voice is so complex, it can be manipulated by even the most sophisticated instruments that we have available to us right now- state of the art, whatever- and at the same time, it's still possible to recognize the source as a human voice. That is fascinating- I really find that fascinating, and that's why I'm working with the human voice so much now."<sup>33</sup>

The human voice gains this fascinating uniqueness from its ability to produce nonlinear effects, owing to the construction of vocal folds from a three-part

material, whose properties cannot be duplicated by the vibrating strings on manmade instruments. While these same instruments would normally have an advantage, by virtue of having larger resonators compared with the human voice, the voice compensates by using an idiosyncratic energy feedback process: the vocal tract stores energy during one part of the vibration cycle, and feeds it back to its source at a more opportune time. The vocal tract can assume a variety of shapes as well, “mimicking” both a trumpet (minus its valves and coiling tube) and something like an inverted megaphone. Aside from this, the power and versatility to be found in something small or invisible synchronizes perfectly with the rest of Duncan’s *oeuvre*.

Incidentally, much of that *oeuvre* has not even been mentioned yet in these pages- it is simply too deep and broad to be contained in a single chapter of a genre-surveying book, requiring its own dedicated volume. I can only console the reader by saying that the un-discussed work has a satisfying amount of conceptual overlap with that already discussed here, even if its final form and the circumstances surrounding its creation is decidedly different.

## **Postlude**

Whether we find John Duncan’s cultural contributions enervating or invigorating, it is difficult to deny that they encapsulate the best aspects of modern autonomous artwork: they cut ‘middlemen’ and all other varieties of ‘middle ground’ out of the picture entirely, they steer clear of pedantry (the camouflaging of half-formed ideas with ornamentation) they champion immersion in the flux of the creative process rather than striving for a specific pre-determined result, and they value mutual exchanges of energy between artist and audience (yet do not always require an audience for the art to proceed in the first place.) The constant motif of purging the unnecessary, and reducing oneself to a compressed core of essential ideas and energy, is another key to both Duncan’s process and end product.

The great paradox of an artist like John Duncan is this: the more he reveals himself, going well beyond the accepted boundaries of “confessional” artwork in the process, the more mysterious or enigmatic he seems to appear to the uninitiated. But this is not any fault of the artist himself: if he appears to be a suspect figure, it is a result of the prevailing warped perception of our common era, in which flagrant honesty courts suspicion, and ironic distancing is the preferred mode of “communication” for millions. There is no easy cure for a modern culture so heavily steeped in easy distraction, mixed signals and self-deception. But in lieu of a doctor to prescribe such panacea, personal encounters with “stimulation art” of John Duncan’s kind will do just fine.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Ed Pinsent, review of *Our Telluric Conversation* by John Duncan & CM von Hausswolff. *The Sound Projector* #15, p. 92. London, 2007.
- <sup>2</sup> Mike Kelley quoted in *John Duncan: Works 1975-2005*, p. 14. Errant Bodies Press, Copenhagen 2006
- <sup>3</sup> Takuya Sakaguchi quoted in *John Duncan: Works 1975-2005*, p. 21. Errant Bodies Press, Copenhagen 2006
- <sup>4</sup> Personal conversation with the author, May 2006
- <sup>5</sup> John Duncan, booklet accompanying *Our Telluric Conversation* CD by John Duncan & CM von Hausswolff, p. 15. 23five, San Francisco, 2006.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> Jerzy Grotowsky, *Towards a Poor Theater*, p. 16. Simon & Schuster, New York, 1969.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> John Duncan quoted in interview by Carl Abrahamsson for *Flashback*, April 2002- reproduced online at <http://www.johnduncan.org/abrahamsson.html>
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> John Duncan, "Happy Homes". *Creed 7*", AQM, Los Angeles, 1981.
- <sup>12</sup> Personal conversation with the author, May 2006
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> John Duncan interviewed by Takashi Asai, reproduced at <http://www.johnduncan.org/interview.jp.html>- translated from the Japanese by the author
- <sup>16</sup> refer to 12 above
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> John Duncan interviewed by Boris Wlassoff for *Revue & Corrigée* (numéro 51, Mars 2002), reproduced online at <http://www.johnduncan.org/wlassoff.rc1.html> translated from the Italian by Thierry Bokhobzka
- <sup>20</sup> John Duncan, *Toshiji Mikawa- Radio Code* cassette side A, AQM, Amsterdam, 1989.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> Arthur Zich, "Japan's Sun Rises Over the Pacific". *National Geographic* November 1991, p.41. National Geographic Society, Washington DC.
- <sup>23</sup> Refer to 3 above
- <sup>24</sup> Refer to 12 above
- <sup>25</sup> Michael Prime, "Explorations in Bioelectronics." *Resonance* Vol. 9 No. 2, p. 17. London Musicians' Collective, London, 2002.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> Erik Hobijn quoted in *Pranks!*, p. 207. Re/Search, San Francisco, 1987.
- <sup>28</sup>
- <sup>29</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Carl Michael von Hausswolff *John Duncan: Works 1975-2005*, p. 20. Errant Bodies Press, Copenhagen 2006

<sup>31</sup> personal correspondence with the author, February 2008

<sup>32</sup> refer to 25 above

<sup>33</sup> refer to 12 above