

plained. Choices like this abound, and point to an understanding of the reader as more of an additional document produced by the festival to accompany the concerts, but also to further catalyze discussions among audience members who experience them.

Seeing the reader from this perspective allows for a better understanding of Polzer's vision for the thematically-driven festival. The emphasis no longer lies exclusively on the historical contextualization of works within the New Music discourse, or credentialing a particular artist. The festival is instead free to use the reader as one further medium in which to consider the topic of "Time Issues," both through the contextualization of individual works, but also through exploring related ideas more generally, many of which can only be touched on during the festival itself. It is a reader that is less focused on codifying and marking the festival event through words, and is rather focused on offering the audience another temporal experience, that of reading a book. The specificity of this temporal form makes for different possibilities, more long form, differently-complex ideas that can be expressed, for instance. It gives the festival public another perspective on the festival and its stated themes. Rather than being supplemental material, it is another expressive medium in which the festival can unfold.

## 5.5 2017 Opening Concert: Julius Eastman

### 5.5.1 The Northwestern University Concert, 16 January, 1980

Having now developed some key ideas surrounding Polzer's approach to Maerzmusik, both this and the following sections will concentrate more thoroughly on individual evenings, and examine how these connect with Polzer's larger ideas about the festival as a whole.

The opening concert to the 2017 Maerzmusik festival was dedicated to the composer Julius Eastman, as were several additional initiatives during the festival, including an exhibition. Eastman was African-American, born in 1940, and would identify as homosexual. He died in isolation at the age of 49. His musical career first started at Ithaca College, before continuing with piano and subsequently composition at the Curtis institute. Eastman's career as both a performer and composer would see him become an integral part of the American music scene as of the 1960s until the 1980s, working together with composers such as La Monte Young and Terry Riley, and also performing his own works both in the USA and abroad.

Eastman's music is often highly minimalist, though inflected with influences from popular music and many instances of improvisation or open scores. While the composer and performer produced a sizeable body of highly interesting work during his life, his works would fail to catch on or become well-known after his

death (Odo Polzer and Engels 2017, 69–73). The composer has been experiencing a resurgence of interest in recent years though, particularly in the USA, with for instance a multi-year concert series being organized by Bowerbird Ensemble in Philadelphia as of 2015 (Bowerbird n.d.). In the same year, Mary Jane Leach published *Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and his Music*, a first major scholarly attempt to reflect on his life and work (“Minimalist Composer Julius Eastman, Dead for 26 Years, Crashes the Canon,” *New York Times*, Oct. 28, 2016).

Programming a concert of Eastman’s music as the opening to a major European music festival was thus an important contribution to this resurgence of interest in the composer. Part of this renewed interest is also a shift in the understanding of American musical history, which traditionally has been largely devoid of black and/or queer voices. This concert will be examined in detail in order to better understand Polzer’s practice of programming as well as how this relates to the larger themes he intends to address with the festival. The following section shows the program for this opening concert.

Note that the second half of the concert was featured a piece called *The Unbreathing*, a new commission by Uriel Barthélémi. The piece was scored for solo drum kit with electronics, flanked on either side by large video screens. Hitting specific drums triggered the patch, making the action onscreen advance. On the screens was displayed texts by Hassan Khan, as well as (simultaneously) images of struggle by oppressed peoples. For reasons of brevity, an analysis of this work will not be undertaken here.

Julius Eastman/The Unbreathing: Opening (Program)

Venue: Haus der Berliner Festspiele (Schaperstraße 24, Berlin)

Date: Friday, 17 March, 2017

Time: 20.00

Part 1 – “Julius Eastman”

(Audience seated in a circle around the performers, centre stage, both onstage and in the audience)

Introduction to the Northwestern University Concert, 16 January 1980

*Evil Nigger*

For four Pianos (1979), German Premiere

*Gay Guerrilla*

For four Pianos (1979)

*Crazy Nigger*

For four Pianos (1978), German Premiere

Intermission

## Part 2 – “The Unbreathing”

*(Audience seated stage right, performer set up on stage left)**The Unbreathing*

For drum set, electronics, and video (2017), world premiere

Uriel Barthélémi

The four pianos situated in the middle of the stage, faced outwards such that the musicians (two men, two women) were each facing the audience, with their backs towards one another. The audience was spread out on all four sides of the musicians. It was possible to sit in the traditional seats in the hall, in bleachers set up on the back wall of the theatre, on another set of bleachers stage right, cardboard stools and bean bags stage left, as well as a littering of these same seats surrounding the performers in relatively close proximity. The atmosphere this evoked was laid-back and casual, contrasting with the traditional concert setup in the Festspielhaus, where the audience, pressed together in the house seats, constitutes a tight community facing the framed stage. Given the minimalist approach of the music, a more SoHo loft atmosphere reminiscent of early minimal music concerts was evoked.

The opening program was a loose re-enactment of an earlier concert of Eastman's work at Northwestern University on 16 January, 1980. Invited by a composition faculty member, Peter Gena, Eastman would travel to the university from New York to realize a performance of the three works that would also later be played at the Berliner Festspiele, part of what he called his *N\*\*\*\*\** series (Hanson-Dvoracek 2011, 27).<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Northwestern's substantial resources, the work, originally conceived for 2 pianos, was expanded to four during the rehearsals for the concert, with the performers being students of the university; 2 male, 2 female—mirrored at the Maerzmusik concert.

Due to racial tensions already simmering on the campus that year, objections to the works' titles were raised by a black student's group, who feared that the

5 The N-word has been censored save for the reproduction of the program and in direct quotations of Eastman.

reappropriation of the N-word that Eastman was attempting would not be possible given current campus politics (Hanson-Dvoracek 2011, 31). The small scandal that this raised would lead Eastman to begin the concert with an introduction that both explained the substance of the works, as well as the meaning of their titles to him. The January 1980 concert was recorded in high-fidelity by the university, and was released in full as part of the 2005 album *Unjust Malaise* on New World Records, an initiative by Mary Jane Leach, an early advocate for the composer's work. This means that the recording of Eastman's explanations has been preserved and is readily available.

At the Maerzmusik opening concert, after two of the three pieces had been played, the musicians paused, and the recording of Eastman introducing the program at the Northwestern concert was played back to the audience. Combined with an identical program to the 1980 concert, and the relatively obscure position of Eastman and his music within the canon compared to other seminal New York minimalists, this programming decision gave the concert the feeling of a re-enactment of a seminal moment in understanding Eastman and his music. This feeling of re-enactment was further strengthened through the reproduction in the festival reader of two pages from the *Village Voice* reviewing the concert as part of an obituary by Kyle Gann for the composer in 1991, and an excerpt of the transcript of Eastman's introduction most likely taken from Hanson-Dvoracek's master's thesis on the Northwestern University concert (Odo Polzer and Engels 2017, 59–61).

There is of course an aspect of chance at play in the existence of this recording, which was largely due to the university's generous facilities and ample budget that led to this document being produced and preserved while others were not. However, as Hanson-Dvoracek puts it well, “[n]onetheless, the Northwestern concert remains unique in the amount of detail it offers not [sic] about Eastman's working habits and about three of his most important compositions” (2011, 35–36). This is not just because the concert at Northwestern was of three works that would become some of Eastman's best known, but also because of the recording of his explications of the ideas behind both the *N\*\*\*\*\** series and *Gay Guerrilla* would subsequently often be cited in attempts to understand Eastman within broader historical and political contexts, as well as positioning him within discourses around blackness and queer identity.

Addressing the audience, Eastman in the recording positions himself in relation to these two points, beginning with blackness and its relationship to American society and economy:

Now, there was, there was a little problem with the titles of the pieces ... They are called the Nigger series. Now the reason that I use that particular word is because for me it has a, what is what I call a “basicness” about it, that is to say that I feel that in any case the first niggers were of course the field niggers and upon

that is really the basis of the American economic system, without field niggers we wouldn't really have such a great and grand economy. So that is what I call first and great nigger, the field niggers, and what I mean by niggers is that thing which is fundamental, that person or thing that obtains to a basicness, a fundamentalness, and eschews that thing which is superficial or, what can we say, elegant... (Hanson-Dvoracek 2011, 96–97)

Eastman's positions black slaves as a "thing" (i.e. people robbed of their humanity) that is fundamental to the society and the basis of the American economy. They are what made it possible to create such grand institutions as the university in which he performed his pieces. Naming his musical works after these people can be understood as a form of empowerment of the term, in that it marks within an elite society an acknowledging of their indebtedness to that oppressed group (see also Ndikung 2018, 4). According to a newspaper account of the concert, despite this initial furor regarding work titles, it was musically well-received by the audience (Hanson-Dvoracek 2011, 35).

Musically, both pieces are highly energetic works of minimalism. *Evil N\*\*\*\*\** features in particular a recurring 4-piano unison cadence between sections that is both distinctive and strikingly memorable. Because stopwatches were not available for the Northwestern performance, Eastman's solution was to call out "one two three four!" to mark the beginning of these unison passages after the four pianos had slipped out of phase—a characteristic that was also maintained in the Maerzmusik concert (Hanson-Dvoracek 2011, 30).

Eastman also mentions the middle piece on the program, *Gay Guerrilla*, in his speech, addressing another important part of his identity and artistic expression:

Now the reason I use *Gay Guerrilla*, G-U-E-R-R-I-L-L-A, that one, is because these names, let me go into a little subsystem here, these names, either I glorify them or they glorify me. In the case of "guerrilla" that glorifies "gay," that is to say there aren't many gay guerrillas, I don't feel that gaydom has, does have that strength, so therefore I use that word in the hopes that they will. You see, I feel that, at this point I don't feel that gay guerrillas can really match with Afghani guerrillas or PLO guerrillas, but let us hope in the future that they might. You see that's why I use that word "guerrilla," it means a guerrilla is someone who is in any case sacrificing his life for a point of view and you know if there is a cause, and if it is a great cause those who belong to that cause will sacrifice their blood, because without blood there is no cause. So therefore that is the reason I use "gay guerrilla" in hopes that I might be one of them, if called upon. (Hanson-Dvoracek 2011, 97–98)

The 1970s marking the beginning of the nascent gay rights movement, the aspirational comparison to guerrillas in Afghanistan or Palestine seems for Eastman fittingly jarring. The work for its part stretches out comfortably over 30 minutes in

Eastman's characteristic minimal style, gradually undulating into a meditation on its sharp, piercing title. It is also the gentlest and calm of the three works.

As part of Maerzmusik's engagement with Eastman and his oeuvre, the festival cooperated with the visual arts project space SAVVY Contemporary, which involved also the launch a year-long research project at SAVVY into Eastman and his life and work.<sup>6</sup> Maerzmusik would focus on the composer again in the 2018 edition of their festival, building on the joint research project, once again presenting him with pride of place at the opening concert (though with a format that was less compelling than this earlier concert). In the introductory booklet to the latter 2018 exhibition, SAVVY's artistic director, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, discusses the recording of Eastman explaining his works, using it in order to help position the space's initiative. He interprets the recording as evidence that Eastman's work cannot be understood without attempting to also understand the historical realities that informed it:

[A core element of this project is] to read Eastman's work not only within its musical sensitivity, structure or texture – (ar)hythmic, (dis)harmony, phonic – but also consider Eastman as a political being who saw his work as a medium to deliberate on the sociopolitical, economy, religion, as well as issues of gender, race and sexuality. (Ndikung 2018, 3–4)

As a part of this contextualization of Eastman as a “political being,” Ndikung criticizes the frequency with which the aforementioned pieces, some of Eastman's most well-known, are performed without any kind of contextualization given for why Eastman named them as such (Ndikung 2018, 4). In these cases, the titles seem to give the problematic effect of titillating the audience with taboo words, while not explicitly making attempts at disrupting their expectations.

Ndikung's project with SAVVY is focused on exactly such a necessary project of contextualization and education, as for him it allows the works to be seen within a light that emphasizes their artistic and critical questions, rather than simply understood on the basis of their formal musical characteristics.<sup>7</sup> The events, performances, lectures, and exhibition that were organized were all forms of supplementary knowledge-creation around the composer, in order for a fuller picture of his oeuvre and artistic message to be articulated. While the first exhibition, presented in 2017, focused on assembling archival materials, the second, in 2018, also com-

6 The project began with performances and a documentary exhibition in the context of Maerz-musik 2017 entitled “Let Sonorities Ring,” and culminating in a symposium, more performances, and a larger, artistic exhibition during the 2018 edition of the festival, entitled “We Have Delivered Ourselves from the Tonal — Of, With, Towards, On Julius Eastman.”

7 See also Ndikung 2017 on the larger curatorial concept for SAVVY Contemporary.

missioned works by contemporary artists, who could respond to Eastman in their own practices, exploring how his work related to them and their current struggles.

Because of this added contextualization, this project, as well as the programming of Eastman at Maerzmusik 2017 and 2018, stands out in the amount of importance it placed on both reflection and re-actualization of the composer's artistic goals. Placing Eastman at the centre of the opening concert must itself be understood as a significant act of (re)inscribing him into the musical canon and music history. However, the organizers seem to be placing emphasis on *not just* repositioning Eastman within this history and canon from which he has been excluded, but also using their exploration of Eastman's work to call into question the very system from which it was excluded. In doing this, the artist's work is not neutralized, but is rather given the space and even expanded, in order to interrogate the entire legitimacy of the system from which it was excluded in the first place (in a way analogous to Eastman's naming of works after those who were the exploited foundation of the society they helped build).

Giving Eastman's works the ability to address the constitution of their frame is anathema to the normative functioning of the classical concert and specifically the contemporary music festival. Both of these rituals are based on forms of repetition, ones that help to (re)assert the identity of contemporary music through paradigmatic, representational portrayals of excellence, rather than call this definitional power into question (see also section 1.4.4). Reconstructing the facts of Eastman's life becomes a way of questioning the legitimacy of this supposedly-neutral concert space in which the musical canon is constituted and perpetuated.

In the same way, instead of working as a repetition of the festival ritual, Polzer's opening concert takes on more the character of a *reenactment*, rather than a repetition or enactment. "Reenactment" is chosen here because when taken together, many elements of the concert work together to reference and replicate the historical event of Eastman's concert at Northwestern. The concert also implicitly posed the question as to why this composer did not become better-known, and what impact his identity touching on two oppressed minorities had on answering that question. Most interestingly, the framing and contextualization of the Eastman opening concert, both with the specificities of the event itself, as well as the effort of contextualization in collaboration with SAVVY taken together accentuated an interpretation of the historical works that implied a re-actualization of Eastman's aesthetic concerns, making them relevant to the present-day audience.

### 5.5.2 A Concert, A Reenactment

Media scholar Maria Muhle has explored reenactment as an artistic strategy in her research in a way that can help to think further about Maerzmusik's approach to programming Julius Eastman. She argues that reenactment must be seen not as a

practice for the righting of historical wrongs, nor for the understanding of historical decisions, but rather as an instrument to re-create out of historical materials a past event within the context of the present (Muhle 2013, 134). Central to Muhle's argument is that the experience of the reenactment, just as in the original event, is immersive, and in this sense not only logical, but also affective. One does not just logically process historical facts, but rather one is put into an environment inflected with them, making the reenactment experiential (2013, 131). The goal of a reenactment of an event is to explore what the recreation of certain conditions can *again do*, exploring further potential and possibilities inherent to the multiplicity of the event, rather than focusing on retracing why something happened, or how it could have happened differently. The production of this reenacted event is significantly itself just as situated and unique as the event it makes reference to. It is not an exact repetition or mimesis, but rather for Muhle a productive tension between participation and representative distance, identification and criticism, in such a way as to unsettle the link between reality and its established norms (2013, 134). This unsettling is what creates the space for the aforementioned new, further action among the participants.

Returning to the Maerzmusik concert itself, Muhle's theory proves productive inasmuch as it allows for a thinking of reenactment as an experimental system based on historical materials deployed as the event of performance. Reenactment then does not need to imply that an actor plays the role of Eastman and delivers a speech explaining the titles of his works to an audience of fictionalized Northwestern University students, nor that the rehearsal period be as chaotic, or the resulting performance as imprecise, as is audible on the recording of that concert in 1980 (Hanson-Dvoracek 2011, 28; Eastman [1980] 2005). Rather, reenactment looks different here. It manifests itself more as a concerted effort at contextualization of the works within the historical context of their performance and the life of their author, *as well as* directly through an identical program to the 1980 concert, and the addition of the recorded voice of Eastman.

Co-constituent of this reenactment approach was also the commitment of Polzer, in collaboration with SAVVY, to research Eastman, his life, and his political beliefs, in an effort that extended also beyond the event of the concert itself into both the festival time of Maerzmusik 2017, as well as unconventionally bridging the festival gap to Maerzmusik 2018.

Small moments of mimesis of the historical event within the concert itself would of course help to evoke the immersion within that world. Ultimately though, the form of reenactment more closely resembles the more diffuse, less literal definition of it put forward by Muhle in her text, one that is based on the exploration of further possibilities within the reenactment of an event. The dimension of critical action that Muhle speaks about can be found in this concert through the accumulation of small interventions to (re)constitute Eastman as a "political being" and his

work as a “medium to deliberate on the sociopolitical, economy, religion, as well as issues of gender, race and sexuality,” to repeat Ndinung’s framing of the composer (Ndiung 2018, 3–4).

There also exists a discrepancy between this politicized, polemicized (re)insertion of Eastman and his music into the festival’s collective consciousness and comparable, more normative “rediscoveries” of composers. The latter occur normally in a move that Boris Groys, in his essay “On the Curatorship” dealing with the traditional role of the curator in the visual arts, would describe as a double movement of iconoclasm and iconophilia. As Groys writes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century museum curator:

All kinds of “beautiful” functional objects—previously used for various religious rituals, decorating the rooms of those in power, or manifesting private wealth—were collected and put on display as works of art—that is, as defunctionalized, autonomous objects of pure contemplation. The curators administering these museums “created” art through iconoclastic acts directed against traditional icons of religion or power, by reducing these icons to mere artworks. (Groys 2008, 42)

The creation-through-decontextualization of works of art, and their subsequent exhibition-through-recontextualization would allow for museum curators to fit these autotomized works into a teleological story of art’s history, ostensibly cleansed of its functionality within the community it originated in (Groys 2008b, 43). In much the same way as Groys describes the functioning of the modernist museum, so too does the functioning of the reintroduction into music festivals of previously unknown or under-performed composers occur. Festivals, with these kinds of thematic foci, will normally follow a basic pattern of “filling in the gaps” in an existing tapestry of composers in order to reconstitute musical history in some small way. Contrast this with the attempt being made here to present and contextualize Eastman. Every effort was made to present the composer within the “functionality” of his context—through a reenactment and thus re-examination of the possibilities of his artistic position rather than through repetition of a preestablished set of criteria applied to a given musical oeuvre.

As a further dimension of this, the concept of reenactment as an emphasizing of the singularity of the event of performance can be extended as well to the specific musical content of Eastman’s works. The works are characteristically minimalist in their extreme use of repetition of both individual notes and musical material. The audience, sat around the stage in a setup reminiscent of the free seating of SoHo’s lofts, is invited to get comfortable and experience the music as a kind of trance-like presence. Similar to visual artists who also worked in this minimal style at that time, Eastman’s work foregrounded the encounter with the performative reality of the work rather than his skill as a composer. The reduced, repetitive musical

material elicits contemplation and meditation on it, a feeling that was enhanced by the setup of the concert at Maerzmusik.

In the creation of this setup, the same kind of “theatrical” setup described by Jackson in her reading of Fried’s critique of minimalist art in section 2.2.1 can be applied to this concert situation. The audience members, in this reading, are understood as being placed within a situated and performative encounter with the work, where their presence and immanent experience *as an audience* is explicitly thematized and given space to unfold. The individual receiver is thus left to complete the work through the bringing in of their own experience, and their specific knowledge-set. Muhle’s concept of reenactment aligns with this interpretation of the music itself, in its focus on the audience finding and exploring latent, hidden potentialities for future action within the contexts of a historical situation.

The audience of the opening concert thus could be said to have found themselves in a liminal zone between the meditation on Eastman’s minimal music, and a reflection at the same time on the factual realities of the composer’s life and relationship to the musical canon, context furnished by the various mediating activities offered to the audience both at and around the Eastman concert. Between these aspects emerges the specific achievement of this programming of the composer, namely to present Eastman’s music both in deference to the historical circumstances that produced it, while at the same time presenting it to the audience in such a way as to have it appear fresh and relevant to their contemporary experience. Polzer, through his practice of contextualization, presented Eastman in context, while also opening that context to being reactivated as a properly musical experience by the audience.

Viewed through the lens of performative curating, Polzer’s approach to the Eastman Opening Concert seems to manipulate the performative event, understood as a knot of a multiplicity of actors acting on it, while at the same time assuming a curatorial responsibility for some subset of these, attempting to bend and mould them through a practice of concert-making to achieve his desired outcome. The concert curator does not simply schedule a concert of a composer that has been forgotten: he uses the festival as an opportunity for the festival public to learn about the composer and their works, and present them in a way that makes their contemporary audience able to relate them to their life, their experience. This is the practice of critical knowledge creation, focused on staging the event of *producing* knowledge, one that does not yet have a set outcome, and as such has also the potential to be different, to create a new possibility, a line of flight, also outside of what the organizer himself is able to conceive of.

A potential repercussion of Polzer’s approach is that it fits better into the interdisciplinary arts field than perhaps many CCM concerts, in that it offers multiple

points at which audiences from many different kinds of backgrounds can embark.<sup>8</sup> This kind of untangling of the various ways in which a concert can be understood happens regardless, however the key difference being addressed here is that of the explicit support and fostering of a wide diversity of readings. Important too is that this interdisciplinary arts approach also will be shown to inform other decisions made in the programming of the festival more generally, such as will be detailed in the next section on the evening Polzer dedicated to the writings and world of philosopher Donna Haraway.

Understanding this approach is key to understanding Polzer's strategy, which is not to move away from music, but rather to move towards a broadening of what music can be, and how it can become an artistic practice equipped with specific tools for addressing problems and issues of major societal import. In this way, the "Festival for Time Issues" becomes about—in this instance—issues of canonization and the whitewashing of contemporary music after all, though only insofar as this issue relates to more fundamental mechanisms of societal functioning, such as the societal forces that seek to exclude and/or neutralize artists as political beings in the first place, with their full dimensionality as critical subjects, rather than commodified author figures optimized for the machinery of the festival.

Significantly, this also seems to be a way of understanding how Polzer programs projects related to re-interpretations of the history of New Music more generally. Instead of addressing for instance historical omissions or injustices like that of Eastman head-on, he approaches them through a more fundamental investigation of the societal and historical forces that coalesced into the reality of the situation. As much as such a project is about Eastman and his music, it seems to be much more about using the festival as a space for interrogating the reasonings of history, and then in this way coming back around to address the issues themselves after the construction of a new imaginary, once again similar to the concept of the reenactment as outlined by Muhle.

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8 In their study of the audience of contemporary music at three European festivals, Grebosz-Haring and Weichbold conclude that outreach activities to establish broader social access to concerts seems not to be effective, and that a high volume of musical capital (understood with Bourdieu) is needed in order to understand New Music. They link this to the "ominousness" of musical tastes needed in order to approach the aesthetically "new" that is being offered by these festivals. Polzer's positioning here suggests a shift in paradigm, wherein musical omnivorousness is replaced with one informed by a variety of arts styles, referred to here as the interdisciplinary arts. The multiple points of entry then become linked still with a high level of education, but across a diversity of fields.