Rupert Murdoch Interviews Experimental Filmmaker and Composer Dan Senn

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RKM: You recently completed two projects in Prague, a collection of sound recordings featuring found objects from your flat, and then two videos that included this work as sound tracks. The sound work is named "Flat Works" but the videos have Czech titles beyond me. Could you pronounce them?

"Pouze Kovové Obaly" (poo-zeh kove-ohv-vay oh-bahlly) meaning "Metal Cans Only" and "Toustovač Vyjednává", (toh-stoh-vahch vee-yed-nah-vah) or "A Toaster Negotiates".

OK. Let's start with "Metal Cans Only" and "A toaster Negotiates". Both use the same subject. Why recycle bins?

It was whimsical decision with practical criteria leading the way. The bins were accessible, similar and yet diverse in detail but, after the first set, while looking for other bin sites, the criteria extended to an "interference" criteria. Maybe, we could talk about that later on?

Good enough. So talk about the recycle bins selection.

Sure. I shot four groups of recycle bins at four locations over three days in an area called Holešovice, in Prague. These were accessible from at least one side, the auto traffic was minimal, the area safe and not far from my Prague studio for quick review. Czechs, especially in this area, are especially tolerant of artists at work—used to it—with these bins unique because of graffiti, signage, wear and tear, simple colors, yellow, blue, green, red, grey and white, acting almost like a painter's canvas.

Did you have a plan for filming these bins?

I am careful not to over-plan shooting strategies as conditions change on a dime, but there were some minimal thoughts like "start at the top". Nothing more. All the bins had metal loops for crane connections and so I thought to begin the video exploration arbitrarily. From thereon, the process was wholly intuitive, spontaneous and, perhaps, remotely connected to the "Flat Works" project. Once filming, like improvising sound back in the studio, I was on autopilot. It is critical to not overthink these things.

So the project just prior to filming was this an all acoustic project named "Flat Works" right?

Yes.

And from where did that come?

I had just replaced my on-location sound recorder, was testing the new one when I began recording objects in my studio to compare stereo microphones. This soon evolved into the "Flat Works" project about a week or before the recycle bin work.

And so "Flat Works" was in preparation for the recycle bin videos?

Not really. I arrived in Prague mid-May, 2024 only with plans to develop ideas for a new video and had not progressed further than some fuzzy ideas when "Flat Works" intervened. Once completed, I returned to forming the video concept and yet this unexpected sound project indeed had implications for the video. Then I landed on the recycle bins for the video project where it was only natural to consider integrating the two projects, one sound, the other film.

You hesitated to connect one with the other?

"Flat Works" had evolved into a wide ranging project made from seven independent studio recordings and then five additional mixed tracks, each standalone works that had been presented in a special webpage that included an expanded "Live Performance Option".

Meaning?

Meaning that any of these twelve tracks could be played independently, directly from the site, or combined, say, using staggered entries, to form a larger work. There are 52 minutes of sound material here, all tracks conceived and engineered to mix well together. In other words, "Flat Works" was fully developed, finished, and the idea of merging these tracks with future video files risked losing their improvisational spontaneity. Even so, the idea remained a possibility.

So, you chose to film a bunch of dirty, marked up recycle bins. How did you distinguish one bin from a group of bins during a shoot? Or was this just random? Also these works of yours are filmed close up so I can't imagine it would make much difference.

There are significant differences but for now I would like focus on a guiding concept that established a continuum of strategies that'd been previously applied in "Flat Works".

Alright. Go on.

I developed a concept I refer to as "location strategies" that apply to video and audio works alike, especially in an improvisational context. For example, I may choose to treat a group of objects, bins here, as a <u>location</u>, this at one end of a continuum or to treat the group, say, five separate bins, as discrete <u>objects</u>, this at the other end of the spectrum. The may seem like a trivial distinction except the impact on video frame and sound content can be dramatic. It is a complex subject, at times difficult to hold in one's head, so allow me to give a few examples.

OK. Continue.

For these bin works my intention was to map the bins rhythmically and gesturally while obscuring the composite image by using closeups, a concept borrowed analogously from my sound improvisations on found objects. In "Flat Works" I am playing common apartment objects, like a kitchen toaster using only my hands. In the video I am shooting a single object, a bin, one at a time using micro-framing techniques. Both the toaster and the bin have been given what I call "<u>object status</u>" where the focus is on a discrete object in different mediums.

Talk about playing a toaster?

OK. When a found object is selected, like a kitchen toaster, it can be held, turned over, it's borders and parts touchable, visible, the use of performance implements, like drum sticks, unthought of. As such, <u>object status</u> renders the instrument opaque. It is what it is with this opacity resisting the conveyance of a gestural history, a lineage magnified by using off-the-shelf mallets. Therefore, object status, without implements, is more likely to produce artifacts unburdened by performance practice—a more natural improvisation where the object functions as its own mallet, score and message.

When similar objects, like five toasters, are grouped into <u>location status</u>, a performer's hands are free, as there is too much data to process. The collection's borders out-of-reach. As the task at hand is to record the sonic characteristics of these objects over time, mallet implements are useful just to reach the edges of the location. They are

designed to process groups of objects while inadvertently transferring a gestural history, the tastes of the player and composer, this repressing the opacity of the objects in the direction of transparency. In this way, a bin stops being a bin, a toaster a toaster.

These two examples represents a continuum for improvised sound performance, "object status" vs "location status", classifications that extend to other mediums as revealed in these recent works of mine.

Now for the visual parallel?

When the recycle bins are shot in object status, or semi-object status, as we are referencing a continuum, the video frame is reduced to its details: the signage on the bin, crane attachments at the top, wear and tear, fragments of graffiti, etc. As the entire recycle bin is not revealed in the films referred to here, the bins filmed close up using rhythmic-gestural techniques, a composite image is being formed in the mind of the viewer whether consciously or not. While abstract, as micro-framing is inherently, the frame contents will gradually share room with the emerging composite visual image. A similar image evolution may be occurring within the sound performance as the performed object is recognized. In location status, the extended frame content is less abstract, recognized, its parts labeled or clumped for efficiency. "Five recycling bins, five colors, some signage, and graffiti." If discarded contents are spilling out it might be interpreted as a symbol of social decay. This data clumping are the "mallets" used to process frame contents and depend on preconceived notions, experiences and prejudices. In location status, even with some inadvertent camera movement to trigger the filming reality or, say, the wind blowing a loose detail, the image verges on still photography. Location status has a summing effect that glosses over the detail and beauty of an object's parts.

OK. This is object status vs location status as it applies to sound and film improv but how does this directly apply when producing a cooperative, multimedia artifact?

I will begin with examples from dance performance. The most common relationship in traditional dance is where the sound is prepared, perhaps, along with a score, and then applied as a guide for the dance choreography.

Another method is to blindly combine a live or prerecorded sound performance with pre-existing or improvised choreography, then present these simultaneously to create a performance. John Cage and Merce Cunningham worked this way exclusively, where resulting simultaneities occur between mediums by chance or never. During the 1990s, as I did not have access to video editing gear, I edited in-camera making standalone films and later improvised the sound on my sculptural instruments. Here, if simultaneities occurred between mediums, it was by chance.

The method used in these recent works was to first, improvise in the object-mode on found flat objects creating a recorded standalone sound composition, second, repeat this using a video camera to make a standalone video work, and then, third, combine these mediums using "knitting-anchoring" methods in a video editor. The effect of using object status in two mediums is to create competing images while invoking a unique, interpolated image for those experiencing the final work.

Again, in these works, micro-framing is used with the bins as well as the found sound objects. But I am also capturing both mediums rhythmically, gesturally, in-time and out-of-time meaning that some purposeful camera movements were made for future editing, say, speeding up or clipping. While in object status, as the composite video image is obscured up close, the narrative is

drawn towards object's terrain and texture rather than any social or personal narrative and, in this way, the micro-mapping of object status can be perceptually rich.

Could you talk about the provenance of these shooting methods?

From the beginning of shooting video, in the early 1990s, I have treated the camera as a very clumsy "percussion mallet", where I would seem to "tap" the image rhythmically as I filmed closeups. I shut the camera on and off capturing as little as three frames, or 1/10th of a second. I referred to these as "percussive videos" or "rhythmic mappings". As I did not have access to video editing gear, the parallel to free sound improvisation was natural. These early film works were made to be shown alongside live sound improvisations on my sculptural instruments. When possible I'd show the films over multiple video monitors at angles and turned on access, this also impacting the way I shot the videos.

So, if you choose instead to film a bin location as five separate objects, in object status, this will change the way you migrate bin to bin, completing one before moving on. If, on the other hand, you treat the five as part of a location, with the obvious expanded boundaries, this will dramatically impact filming strategies. *THIS is the value of distinguishing between object and location status*—the vastly increased chance of producing gestures and works free of cliches. *Groupings of objects infer location*, like groups of houses do a neighborhood, and by limiting the reach for off-the-shelf mallets, original performances are more likely to appear.

Is there a level of over-consideration here that will never be appreciated by others?

Location strategies may appear as hair splitting and yet the impact on surface texture, structure and, say, the drama of a

work, is stark. In these bin works, a subtle mystery evolves as uncontextualized closeups are revealed rhythmically, gesturally, with the character of this revelation essential. True, an art appreciator does not necessarily need to know these things. It's enough to respond "Wow, that works!" Yet, knowledge of the systems at work, i.e. location strategies, reveal a conscious source for understanding free improvisation in competing mediums. As an interdisciplinary artist, I am often working with cross-medium processes as I work out the connections. Again, in these works, *object oriented strategies provide* less to work with, reveal less of the composite image, enforce restraints while, ironically, expanding performance options. In short, object status discourages the use of cliches as *one's hands are full*.

When performing a found object, like the stackable plastic storage box used in "Flat Works", did you have a plan of attack and, if so, did you rehearse?

As I mentioned, instruments that lend themselves to object status, are difficult to score without trivializing them. They work best in free improvisation, as their shapes are often complex in comparison to commercial instruments. They lack transparency, are opaque and effectively act as their own score. Therefore, in performance, once the mic is positioned, the levels checked, a pair of headphones in place, I'm left with thoughts like "I will increase the density as I become more familiar with the object" or "I'll start with the top edge." And then I'm off exploring the sonic possibilities as a child might when entering a new, large playhouse. From thereon, I trust my instincts, that interesting sounds will be found and, at some point, an internal clock tells me I'm finished. I then turn off the recorder, pull out the SD chip, and go to my studio for a listen.

Suppose you do poorly?

Small adjustments, edits, may be made but I rarely redo am improv. If I'm well rested, my mind clear and at peace, the first take is enough. I'm also a stickler for preserving the exploration spontaneity as this is not a wholly intellectual process laying my hands and ears on an object for the first time. To re-explore new, now old, geography, and I often think of sound objects as having a sonic terrain, this may succeed but too closely approaches an uncomfortable pretentiousness. The more you rehearse or play a found object, the sooner it loses it's opacity. As it is, I'm recording in an isolation room with an excellent mic, so... (PAUSE) So, ask me if there are any other reasons to follow this recording regimen?

Consider the question asked.

Thanks. The irony of the non-rehearsal of non-linear, found instruments is that it produces a *predictable result* that can be applied in multiple takes meant to be mixed later on. Again, like a child entering a fun but strange environment, I am able to explore new terrain with the same attitude twice, thrice, etc. This discovery pattern guides me while acting as a dependable reactive score. I used a related method when recording the I Ching interpretations many years ago. I also rely on instinctual exploration for practical, predictable purposes. In "Flat Works" I performed seven objects as such producing seven sound files that worked well together when mixed, the cohesive sense behind the "Live ReMix Option" given on the page site. All sound files mix well together when initiated simultaneously, and better still canonically. A graphic score would also assist in this regard as was the case with the I Ching interpretations.

Doesn't this clash with your position on performance practice?

It has long intrigued me to design systems that are resistant to kitsch even while even considering narcissistic attempts using systems that spin in multiple directions. Let me refer to my encounter with the ancient Raku ceramic process where purposefully difficult materials are used *by design* to suppress artistic ego. I came across this concept while studying with the ceramist Len Stach at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse in 1971, ideas so alien it took me years to wrap my head around them. A process so wieldy that it dares the slickest of the slick to try and control it, that is, without cheating, and yet even the efforts to co-opt the system are interesting. The effect of the process in its purest form is the production of pottery that resist and reflect less of the will of the artist. A paradox here is that the process does not level the ground, where all the work produced is the same. Indeed, quite the opposite. Another big topic.

Do you ever allow yourself to relax, fall back on cliches feeling protected by the difficult systems you're using?

The systems I am referring to here exist on a continuum and can be overridden smartly or cynically as I just mentioned. Object status strategies, for example, however, are less likely to use implements with the gestural baggage they carry. And location status strategies may trigger performances that can be overridden from the opposite direction—like using difficult to manipulate mallets. For this reason I try not to use absolute language here. More important is the conscious discovery of conditions that yield certain results. I do not seek protection from these systems but am quite comfortable in their company.

You seem to treat any form of repetitive expression as some kind of bogie man.

My comments here are within the context of free improvisation. When playing jazz freely these rules apply but on a different scale—the rules are in a quasi-fixed form. When rules are stretched, it brings tension-pleasure to refined listeners as does extensions and anticipations in Baroque counterpoint. Indeed, what I am referring to has, perhaps, closer ties to the problems one might have with mind chatter. A sane person is able to distinguish between his thoughts and those coming from elsewhere.

In both of these new films, I notice that there is a level of social interference in the video, that is, people walking through the image field? As you have set up comparisons between shooting video and performing found objects, is this problematic?

Not a problem. Just a difference. As I've said, the sound tracks were made in silent isolation, without social interference. The video tracks are made in public places where one could edit out unplanned intrusions—but I don't. Quite the opposite. While not a part of my original criteria for site selection in March 2023, I quickly shifted to include and even seek out this interference—people, cars, trams, insects and animals passing through the live camera field. It quickly became part of the selection criteria as it added a social, even dramatic, dimension to the work.

Have you been confronted by citizens while shooting in public places?

Czechs mostly give me a wide berth but, if there is no way around, they walk through without fanfare, anonymously. Some will gesture for my permission, me waving them through. It's always been a relaxed situation. The sites I shoot tend to be near my Prague studio in Holešovice, north of the city center, where many artists live and work. It's part of why I choose to live and work in Prague. In "Danger Alley" the cops were called out as I was filming in front of a line of cars but even they smiled and waved me on. So I developed this policing episode as a micro-drama into the film.

You mentioned that you've work out systems for integrating the film and sound. You said, while conceived and realized similarly, these works do not need the other to be presented solo in concert, right?

Yes.

And then you have a small reluctance to mix standalone works, right?, and yet you've made independent works in different mediums with every intension of merging them. Could you explain this contradiction further?

When composing-performing the "Flat Works", I had various objectives in mind. First, as I've said, I began by just testing out some new gear, this launching an unexpected sound project. Second, using the locations status strategies as described, I came up with seven related works aimed at producing second generation improvisations by other players using a "Live ReMix Option". Third, I had early on embraced the possibility of using "Flat Works" with video. My plan was to compose new works for the videos or, maybe, reach into my library of existing improvisations. Four, while filming the recycle bins on the heals of "Flat Works", I was increasingly aware that the just completed sound project was influencing the recycle bin videos and that a structural integration might be especially interesting.

Ok. You're off the hook. Then explain the crossover between mediums.

The most obvious crossover was the micro-mapping of common, found objects, like a recycling bin with a kitchen toaster. Both

were improvised, presented rhythmically, gesturally, producing standalone works, one in a visual percussive manner, the other in an aural percussive manner. While mutually obfuscating the identity of the sampled objects using micro-mapping techniques, the crossover is intensified by emerging invocations of divergent images from two mediums. But alas, there is also a contrapuntal, competing motion occurring between mediums assisted by synchronizations, these affixed later on. Therefore, the works have much in common with dance and Baroque music, albeit, using recycle bins and plastic storage boxes.

Could you address the methods used to merge these divergent tracks but first your choice of one sound track over another?

The decision to merge tracks, video with sound, as I've said, begins with two completed "standalone" works. Yet, to be more accurate, another way to think of these artifacts *destined for merger* is that they are "rough edits". While autonomous, I've effectively cooked the books on them. Even while shooting, no longer limited by in-camera discipline, I am conscious to leave, if possible, a bit of footage at the beginning and end of a shot to allow adjustments later on. This was not the case with sound except, when working with total silence between events, linear adjustments are a snap and have little if any effect on the sense of gestural spontaneity.

The choice of whether to use "this sound track with that video" is wholly intuitive suffused with thoughts like "this works", "that doesn't work", "this might work if only…"or "none of this is working." It's like the judgements associated with my improvisations. I just know and this is why I'm an artist and not a baker. But, once a decision is made, the "knitting" process approaches pure craft. A work like "Toustevač Vyjednává", merged with a "Toaster" improvisation, is so similarly

conceived that the two files merge easily. Their rhythmic density and shape so similar to where many near simultaneities happen and need little adjustment. Elsewhere, with some exceptions, I note where changes occur and decide whether to create an anchor point between mediums, or to let a track float independently. This too is mostly intuitive.

This all seems terribly complex?

Perhaps, but not while using an established, progressive framework. Just the same, this process is likely responsible for producing apparent language discrepancies, like, "standalone works" and "rough edits." While completing a video, and before adding a sound track, I am shaping an autonomous artifact knowing full well it's also a rough edit awaiting the next step. Call me silly but that's what happens. A well-formed, stepwise process enables complexity while yielding language discrepancies. Without this framework, working from the seat of one's pants, may make you feel like a genius but the work is invariably stupid. Compartmentalization is key where one never leaves go the whole.

In another direction, do you consider the social interference you mentioned earlier as random?

Perhaps, stochastic is a better word.

Stochastic?

In this context it would be randomness heavily weighted by decisions made before the shoot like my choice of a city, neighborhood, culture, closeness to trams, cars, the local grade school, the time of day, even by the clothing I'm wearing. I don't work in a clown suit, for example.

Still, do you fear losing control of your art by embracing this chaos?

Before making "Danger Alley" in March of 2023, it hadn't crossed my mind. I just had an impulse on a windy day to shoot a sequence of old wooden garage doors I thought beautiful at the edge of a soccer stadium in Holešovice, went out with my gear discovering Czechs were everywhere and sometimes walking through the camera field. Mind you "interference" includes other things like weather conditions. Months later I shot "<u>From Nothing</u>" with traffic passing so close behind that it unnerved me. But I had already determined the site as difficult, the wall where these once bold paint strips were would soon be razed for new construction and I'd been looking for extreme conditions to test what I might do with it, or it with me. "From Nothing" fit the bill as did "<u>Cracks & Edges</u>" and then "<u>Rus Wall dot CZ</u>". Difficult shooting conditions with stochastic interference, like nerves, can push innovation.

Do you mean for your work to be viewed online or in the concert hall?

The problem with online viewing is mostly the sound quality. If headphones are used, as the sound is full sound spectrum, they can work. Recently, in Frankfurt, works like the recycle bin pieces were presented, all projected 4k on a large screen with a large sound system and they were exactly as I had made them. Very gratifying. If viewed over an iPhone or iPad, the video does well enough but the sound takes a hit as half the spectrum is inaudible and the spatial positioning is ineffective. Headphones and ear phones help with the newer iPads built-in speakers an improvement.

Do audiences appreciate the work?

Again, in Frankfurt, at a SKOP event, my sense was that there was general bewilderment. A few seemed appreciative. A woman told me that "You are clearly a very lonely man". Look, it's nice when my work is liked but I'm not dependent on this. I'm on a path of self-discovery, my main concern.

Just to be clear, these silent videos are something like a sound performance of a visual object?

Yes. They are informed by my musical training and is an example why cross disciplinary actions and training can be helpful. <u>Phill Niblock</u>, a filmmaker friend who recently passed and influenced me greatly came to film from a working class and photographic background. I came to film from the working class and Bach. And such origins shouldn't be trivialized as they open up upper class mediums, like experimental film and music, to objective, practical solutions. The fluxes movement depended on this. For example, <u>Phill's use of speakers and industrial space instrumentally</u> is a case in point. My use of the camera as a percussion mallet soundlessly beating on visual objects, etc.

You have referred to making similar videos in the 1990s using gear less sophisticated to what is available today.

I started shooting video in the early '90s, experimenting as I went along, calling it "percussive video". I named one piece "<u>Still Moving</u>" where I rhythmically mapped a wooden Japanese Language School from the early 20th Century accompanied by a recorded improvisation on an instrument of mine called a <u>Fayfer Harp</u>.

Why not "rhythmic video"?

That works too but when making these early videos, I usually handheld the camera, or used an inexpensive, somewhat shaky tripod while accepting the frame movement as I had figured out that a still subject filmed using moving or unstable frame emulates human sight and is thus tolerated. <u>Montana Nash</u> is a example. These early percussive

videos, by the way, were all in-camera edited, meant to be accompanied with live sound, or by a second generation SVHS copy. More importantly, these percussive videos were meant to be seen over 2-8 rotated, closely situated monitors of different sizes, this, in a sense, an analog to Phill's use of speakers as instruments. The shooting method came directly from found object improvisation learned formally while studying at the University of Illinois with Salvatore Martirano, my main composition teacher. When filming these works, I had the sense of "tapping" or sliding over the surface of the visual object as one might with metal brushes on a snare drum. The word "percussive" better described the sense of how I was filming the object.

So you "micro mapped" objects on film already in the '90s as you might have performed musically on a found object?

Correct but as I did not have editing gear and wanted to preserve the quality of the video, everything was in-camera edited. Audiences saw second generation films.

Being unable to edit out-of-camera, that must've been rigorous?

Well, I was younger… Yes, it was exhausting as I couldn't make an error this requiring the concentration of a live music improvisation. I was also working on other levels as each shot must be of still photo quality, part of an ongoing rhythmic phrase, an overall structure and then while cognizant of visual alignments with other video monitors. Again, these works were presented simultaneously using additional rotated monitors.

Were you considering the sound you would add to these films while shooting?

No, nothing beyond what I've just mentioned. Any form of precise synchronization, was not available to me but I was into the chance synchronization concept in any case. As I also wanted to preserve image quality even if only shooting 720x480, the finished original work would go directly to the performance/playback medium, SVHS tape, to preserve the longevity of the original tape. This was slightly more convenient than chemical film, without the patina, though far cheaper. By the end of the '90s, however, I transferred this early work to digital storage mediums but, by that time, was mostly writing note music and doing installation work.

OK. Before ending here, let's get back to your current video projects but let me quick ask how the early percussive videos impact the way you shoot now?

Today I shoot exclusively off a tripod while still thinking rhythmically, percussively. I'm continuously thinking of, making room for edit adjustments, i.e. for synching with the soundtrack. Knowing that each clip can be altered—an ability to control speed, color, frame shape as in Banana Telegraph—is amazing. Perhaps, I'm thinking more about the sound too. Image quality is no longer a factor shooting in 4k. I might swipe over large areas while micro-mapping, suddenly come to a halt, doing this repeatedly and in variation, thinking how I might edit this later. The once nonexistent edit stage is now omnipresent as is the discipline and rigor from the distant past. I toss out very little footage and rarely change the clip order.

Why is this?

Like with sound improvisation, one must respect the discovery moment—the decisions made spontaneously. While the exact linear placement can be micro shifted without much effect, when shooting or recording sound in the object status mode, these are coming from the part of me where you just know things and must trust yourself.

Thank you for this, Dr. Senn.

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