

metamusic



a project by alien productions

Lilly and Kasi, photo: S. Niedermayr

Winning project ECAS Artist in Residence 2012 working period 2 "Bridging"



Kasi on the Casio, photo: ORF musikprotokoll, M. Gross

In every bigger city, there is a zoological garden, where animals are on display for the public. A zoo is an architectural space that widely reflects the relationship we have to the animal world—the more we estimate the rights and needs of the animals, the more we want them to live in ambients replicating their natural habitats rather than in small cages. We understand that boredom is a major problem of living in captivity. Much has to be undertaken to offer new challenges and diversions to the zoo inhabitants.

Our project aims to build electronic sound installations to be used by the animals themselves. Using a wide range of sensors and tools, the animals become able to explore and to play with sounds and sonic moods.

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about

The animals, not the humans, are in full control of the outcome of this sonic sculpture. We have built the tools in close collaboration with zoologists and zookeepers. Animals do not use music in the way humans do. Human music means nothing to them. But maybe they find meanings and use in sound, which we have not yet discovered, but we too can enjoy once we let them take control themselves.

<http://alien.mur.at/metamusic>

<http://musikprotokoll.orf.at/en/metamusic/blog>



from top to bottom:
 (1) Joki on the Sonic Swing
 (2) Kasi on the Touchpad
 (3) Rosi on the Bowl Box
 photos:
 (1, 2) alien productions
 (3) ORF musikprotokoll, M. Gross

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the instruments



Our point of departure was the idea to deploy interactive sound installations for zoo animals. Zoos are urban areas where a natural surrounding is imitated by highest artificial means. The animals living in captivity seem to know perfectly that a fake natural “home” is only a scenery. The result: boredom, which seriously impairs their well-being. In collaboration with zoologists and animal keepers we seek to give them means, tools and sensors enabling them to play electronic sound installations by themselves. metamusic is truly set up for animals; humans just to be onlookers.

The first question raised, which animal species would be the best receptive to this project. Focusing on parrots we soon found a partner: the Parrot Shelter of the ARGE Papageienschutz in Vösendorf near Vienna, home and shelter for more than 150 birds. This seemed to be the ideal field for us to work with them intensely for several months. The parrots became ideal project partners because of their hybrid nature. Actually they are wild animals with a complex social behaviour, but all birds we are working with are bred or raised up by humans, thus informed by human behaviours. (We want to clearly point out here that keeping parrots in captivity fundamentally contradicts their nature and thus cannot be accepted).

Parrots are immensely intelligent, possessing individual personalities and they are extremely communicative. The more we worked with them, the more the differences in interest, awareness and creativity became noticeable on the individual animals. We developed a variety of electronic and mechanical sound instruments. With their behaviour, the birds let us know almost immediately where the deficits and errors lay in our devices and conceptions. For sure we have learned more from them as they have learned from us.

In the end, we started to work with the so called “Science Group”: A flock of African Grey Parrots who already had taken consent in participating in scientific investigations and whose interest in our artistic experiments was the biggest. Five individuals—Kasi, Rosi, Joki, Chica and Jago—became interpreters of our sound installation at the musikprotokoll 2013 in Graz, Austria. The aviary build for this first public appearance was equipped with interfaces for the parrots. A special bi-directional setting allowed us to play a concert together with them.

metamusic at musikprotokoll im steirischen herbst 2013
installation views, videostills: alien productions



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the installation

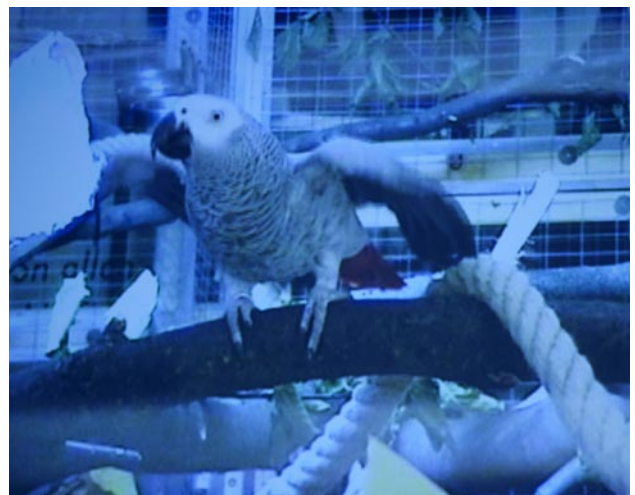




metamusic at musikprotokoll im steirischen herbst 2013, the concert
photo: Kristian Markovic, videostills: ORF musikprotokoll, M. Gross

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the concert



Installation	Oct 3rd - 6th 2013, 10 am – 6 pm
Concert	Oct 5th 2013, 6 pm
	GrazMuseum Palais Khuenburg, Sackstraße 18, A 8010 Graz
Broadcasts	<p>Jan 9th 2013 metamusic: feature #1: Papageien beim musikprotokoll 10'59" http://oe1.orf.at/artikel/327973</p> <p>Feb 27th 2013 #2: Was steckt dahinter? 19'40" http://oe1.orf.at/artikel/332801</p> <p>April 24th 2013 #3: Welche Musik mögen Papageien? 10'29"</p> <p>June 19th 2013 #4: Die perfekte Tonaufnahme 18'15" http://oe1.orf.at/artikel/343516</p> <p>Aug 28th 2013 #5: Die ersten Instrumente 15'50"</p> <p>Sept 26th 2013 The Making of metamusic 54'58" http://oe1.orf.at/programm/349933</p> <p>Oct 2nd 2013 Vorschau auf das ORF musikprotokoll im steirischen herbst. http://oe1.orf.at/programm/350511</p> <p>Oct 10th 2013 metamusic Konzert 54'40" http://oe1.orf.at/programm/351259</p> <p>All broadcasts by Susanna Niedermayr and alien productions. ORF Radio Ö1 Zeit-Ton, 11:03 pm</p> <p>https://soundcloud.com/ecas-musikprotokoll/</p>

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facts & credits

alien productions [Martin Breindl, Norbert Math, Andrea Sodomka]: concept, artistic direction
 Iris Baldinger, Catarina Markovic-Güttner: zoological guidance, animal attendance
 Marion Wenny: zoological guidance (Papageienheim Vösendorf)
 Susanna Niedermayr: project support, documentation
 Norbert Schweizer: project manager
 Manfred Weiss, Gerd Thaller: constructor (aviary)
 Michael Reiter: constructor (instruments)
 Martin Leitner: sound engineer
 Norbert Math, alien productions: website
 with best thanks to: ARGE Papageienschutz
 Nadja Ziegler, chairwoman
 Christina Pöder, animal keeper
 Manuela Habe, animal trainer

Winning project ECAS Artist in Residence 2012 working period 2 "Bridging".

Produced in cooperation with ARGE Papageienschutz.

Installation and concert Graz 2013: commissioned by musikprotokoll im steirischen herbst 2013.

metamusic at musikprotokoll im steirischen herbst 2013
installation views, videostills: alien productions



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videostills





Iris Baldinger, photo: ap

On the car park in front of the animal shelter we are joined by Iris Baldinger, the zoologist who set us up with the parrots' home. Baldinger got to know and love parrots during her studies at the university. "When you work with these birds, every day is different," Baldinger goes into raptures, "you're constantly facing new challenges and have to come up with solutions. You're always on the go."

We meet Catarina Güttner, who runs the parrots' home. The zoologist, who has also studied primates, confirms that parrots are among the most intelligent creatures. "We know now that parrots have reached the developmental stage of 4-year-old kids," Catarina Güttner explains and compares their intelligence to that of chimpanzees. "You can tell if you've ever owned a parrot. They require plenty of attention and variety. Otherwise they get bored quickly."



Catarina Markovic-Güttner, photo: ap

Catarina Güttner brings us to an aviary that houses a very special group of parrots, two of them even known to Iris Baldinger from the days of her studies at the Vienna University, the grey parrots Kasi and Karoline. Parrots seem to be a rewarding subject for study, as there are always inquiries by students interested in studying them. "Most experiments go very well with this group of parrots," Catarina Güttner explains, "they are extremely curious and interested and are always eager to participate."

Breindl explains that for many years already they have been trying out various ways of sharing the control over the artistic creative process with other people, devices/machines, computers—and for some time now also with animals or birds. Breindl: "We want to create a medium in which intelligences of various kinds can work together to rattle the anthropocentric world view." In other words, if you take the communicative aspect of art seriously, you automatically arrive at these kinds of solutions.

Since the first time we visited the parrot shelter run by ARGE Papageienschutz we've known: parrots enjoy listening to music. "But nobody really knows what kind of music they like, and that is what we're here to find out," Andrea Sodomka sums up today's goal. "How do the birds react to rhythm, instruments, voices, electronics? What kind of sounds do they accept? Of course this is fascinating because we have no idea what is going to happen here." Whereas we kept our distance, setting up our equipment off to the side so as to disturb the birds as

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blog-excerpts



Norbert Math, Marion Wenny, photo: ap

little as possible, Breindl stationed himself right in front of the aviary. "As soon as the first sounds came out of the speakers, the birds started singing along excitedly," the artist tells us. "It was like a chorus. Then the situation settled down and the parrots became calmer. As an audience they were actually quite attentive, the way we often wish human audiences would be."

Norbert brought a tablet which he had programmed to be a simple interactive tool for the birds: large colourful geometric patterns (i.e. a red square) on the screen, which—when touched—produce a sound. We gave it another try with the grey parrots of the Science Group. The result could not be better: From the very moment when Iris demonstrated the operating mode of the tablet, the greys, one after the other, approached and started to peck and hammer on the screen.



Andrea Sodomka, photo: ap

geienschutz explains that since parrots are birds that breed in trees, they have to bore their own nest holes year after year. Therefore in these birds the impulse to disassemble everything they get their beaks on is directly linked to the reproductive instinct. "We could hide an instrument in a hole," Norbert Math comments spontaneously.

Norbert Math has elaborated the setting with the red square even further. Now when the parrot taps it, the square moves to the other side of the screen. Again, Kasi is extremely interested. She actually follows the movement of the red square and keeps activating the button with its beak. The second setting with the six coloured squares is a big hit. However, the sounds are drowned out by the loud background noise. Abstract sounds would probably stand out better in this environment.

Finally, we ask Nadja Ziegler why parrots have such a passion for taking things apart. The chairwoman of ARGE Papa-



Martin Breindl, photo: Baldinger

We decided to try out a new mechanical instrument. Norbert built a prototype of a little birds' theremin, using a shoe box, a wooden bowl, a ball, a rope and four photosensitive sensors. Containing a small computer and two active speakers. Apparently this instrument is not bird proof; we expected that our flock of greys would have it destroyed within seconds. Nothing of this happened. The birds eyed this instrument suspiciously, fluffed their feathers up and kept big distance. The largest of the birds did its best to stare the object away. Even Kasi, usually the brightest and most nosey individual, backed off. So Andrea and Marion of the ARGE Papageienschutz were the only odd birds to play.

On Saturday Oct 5 2013 we had a live concert with the parrots. The setting was like this: Andrea Sodomka and I sat on stage in a concert room not far from the bird's place. Via a video and sound link we were able to stream and project the bird room into the concert room and we were able to play back from a selection of sound pieces into the bird room. With the birds there were Catharina Güttner, Iris Baldinger and Martin Breindl trying to engage them in playing the instruments. Because of the open microphone lines, the humans in the bird cage were not allowed to speak. Interestingly, also the parrots kept from producing any human words or phrases—the just kept chirping in the language they use among themselves. What really captivates me is the way the animals interact with the situation they

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Susanna Niedermayr, photo: ap

are put in: the birds adapted very fast to the new situation and, as soon as there was an audience the birds (at least some of them) started to search for their attention and to interact with them. So we ended up being into a very complex situation involving the birds themselves and the social relationships within them, our own group of different people with different tasks, the audience—and each of this groups getting into different interactions, expressing their needs and wishes, trying different means and signals.

So, there is something I learned: It is the social construction that makes the piece, not the way it sounds. And it is the building of „ambients of interactions“ and investigating them we should take the main care of. The birds will always interact with us, because they expect some outcome to happen. Whatever means and expressions they choose, it's up to them.

alien productions was founded 1997 by Andrea Sodomka, Martin Breindl, Norbert Math and August Black as a network for working on the theory and practice of new technologies and media. Since 1985 all four artists have transcended boundaries with their technological art—as a group or as individuals, and often in collaboration with other artists. Their work includes media performances and installations, electronic music, net art, radio art, sound art, interactive art, video, the visual arts and artistic photography. alien productions stands especially for cooperative projects with other artists, technicians, theorists and scientists. alien productions is not a group of artists in a classic sense, but an open network, where specialists of different provenance work in an interdisciplinary way.

alien productions contribute to collaborative radio- and internet projects on a regular base. Their works were commissioned by and produced for NTT InterCommunication Center [ICC], Tokyo (J), Österreichisches Kulturforum Praha (CZ), musikprotokoll im steirischen herbst (A), ICMC International Computer Music Conference (USA), Festival International de Musique Expérimentale, Bourges (F), MITO Settembre Musica (I), hamburger musikfest (D), Konzerthaus Wien (A), Festival de Música de Alicante, (E), ARS Electronica Festival (A), EBU European Broadcasting Union, ORF Kunstradio, ORF Zeitton, RNE Radio Nacional de España, BBC British Broadcasting Cooperation, RAI Radiotelevisione Italiana, RTP Rádio e Televisão de Portugal, RSO Radiosymphonieorchester (A), the ensembles die reihe (A), Repertorio Zero (I), early reflections (CZ), among many others.

Martin Breindl works in the fields of intermedia, installation, net.art, radio art, sound art, video and visual arts. He studied at the Academy of Applied Arts, Vienna and at the University of Vienna. He is also curator for artistic photography. Martin Breindl was born 1963 and lives in Vienna, Austria.

Norbert Math is an artist active in the fields of radio art, electronic music, installation, and Internet. He studied at the Academy of Music, Vienna (institute for electroacoustics) and worked at the Institute for Electronic Music and Acoustics—IEM in Graz and held lectures at the Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti NABA in Milan. Norbert Math was born 1962 in Bozen, Italy and now lives and works in Vienna, Austria.

Andrea Sodomka is a composer, media artist and curator. She works in the fields of performance, installation, electronic music, net.art, radio art, video and interactive art. She studied at the Academy of Applied Arts, Vienna, and at the Academy of Music, Vienna (institute for electroacoustics). She held lectures at the University of Vienna, the University of Art and Industrial design in Linz, and the University of Music, Vienna. Andrea Sodomka was born 1961 and lives in Vienna, Austria.

Iris Baldinger is a zoologist and works in an office for agriculture and forestry. She studied biology and zoology at the University of Vienna and wrote her diploma thesis on grey parrots. She also took courses in animal-assisted therapy at the University of Veterinary Medicine in Vienna.

Catarina Markovic-Güttner is a zoologist. She studied biology and zoology at the University of Vienna and wrote her diploma thesis on the habitat of orangutans. She was director of the parrots' home of the ARGE Papageienschutz in Vösendorf near Vienna, A.

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biographies

Susanna Niedermayr, *1972, Vienna (AT), studied fine arts and political sciences. From 1995 to 2000 she was a member of WochenKlausur, a Vienna-based international group of artists who have made sociopolitical interventions at the invitation of art institutions and cultural organisations since 1993. She has been working as an editor, presenter, web designer and curator for the ORF (Ö1, FM4) since 1996, amongst others as a presenter of ORF Ö1 Kunstradio. In 2002 she set up line_in:line_out. Since 2007 she has co-curated the ORF festival musikprotokoll im steirischen herbst. Since 2008 she has been one of the two editors-in-chief of the new music program of ORF Ö1, and as a part of this also co-producer of the radio series ORF Ö1 Zeit-Ton, for which she has been working as an editor since 2000. She has published in various publications and has worked as an advisor and curator for Wien Modern, Wiener Festwochen and Turning Sounds (Warsaw), among others. She is co-author of European Meridians – New Music Territories, PFAU, 2002/2003. Susanna Niedermayr lives and works in Vienna.

Norbert Schweizer, *1961 in Linz (A), project companion; studies in audiotechnique (Hellmut Gottwald) and electroacoustics (Dieter Kaufmann) in Vienna. 1992 until 2008 head of production and administrative director, O.K Center for contemporary art, Linz. 2004 – 2009 lectureship, University of Art and Design Linz. Since 2009 self-employed management consultant und project companion for art and culture. Lives in the upperaustrian lakelands.

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