

James Hoff



Marian Kaiser



#2 James Hoff in conversation
with Marian Kaiser

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Edited by Adam Gibbons and Eva Wilson

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MARIAN KAISER: Hi.

JAMES HOFF: Where should I sign this?

KAISER: Just your name down here
somewhere.

HOFF: Here?

KAISER: Um, no. Heimatinstitution: none.
Künstlerworkshop Evidenzstörung.
Unterschrift des Gastes.

HOFF: That one?

KAISER: Yes, you are the 'Gast'.
Now we can walk around with this recorder,
Brinkmann style.

HOFF: Thomas Brinkmann?

KAISER: Ja. 'Gelber schmutziger Himmel.
Gelbschmutziger Himmel ...'

HOFF: You know that guy?

KAISER: No, he died of cancer somewhere.
No, not true. He was hit by a car
in London. Looked the wrong way while
crossing the street.

HOFF: Ah, I was talking about the
musician. The sound artist.

KAISER: Ah, no no no. What's his first name ... Rolf Dieter Brinkmann. He was one of the first guys to write and publish beat poetry in Germany. Used to run through Cologne with a recorder taped to his chest, ranting on about the 'Gelber schmutziger Himmel' above him. 'Ein mieser gelber schmutziger Kölner verfluchter elender Kackhimmel', a lousy yellow dirty shitty Cologne sky. Very West German.

HOFF: Cornelius Cardew? Pretty sure he was killed by a car in London.

KAISER: Yeah, one of my favourites actually. Could you plug that in back there? Thank you.

KAISER: I brought *Notes on the Passing of Cars* [Sisyphus Press, 2004] by James Hoff but the book lost its cover.

HOFF: Is that the Dalachinsky one? Yeah, Dalachinsky published it. I haven't thought about that one in a long time. I like it though. Do you have the other ones from that period? There was *Notes on the Passing of Cars*, *Ten More Poems*, and *About Ten Poems*, which came out right before [both Ugly Duckling Presse, 2003 and 2002]. The last one I didn't actually write, someone else wrote it: Matvei Yankelevich, a close friend of mine and also a poet. He showed up to my birthday party one year with twenty-five copies under his arm. The poems were good too (at least for me). It was my first book and it was a relief to have it out in the world, to have it over and done with. I guess to some extent it was a relief to not have had to write it as well.

KAISER: I brought it because I thought, for a couple of reasons it might be good to start by talking about poetry if we want to speak about ways of distributing and disseminating information. A lot of what you do in rather technological ways these days goes back to what you did in Berlin around 2000, in a more analogue fashion, if you will – and it is closely linked to poetry and its distribution.

There is something that I'd like to call a *function* (in the mathematical sense) which runs through your work diagonally and correlates the works through various times, media, and technologies. These *functions* are closely linked to material processes but are themselves not material, rather something you could call a *medial form*, in the way that Ernst Cassirer or Erwin Panofsky used the term 'symbolic form' (the most well-known example probably being the reading of linear perspective as a cultural convention). Those forms are effects of media technologies, but can detach and spread through other media (or use people as carriers). I would like to follow this diagonal.

The other reason why I brought *Notes on the Passing of Cars* is that it introduces a timeline. Forgive me for historicising you. You see, I like anecdotes. The way that they travel from mouth to ear to mouth to type to print and maybe back again. Let's be anecdotal. Anecdotes are nicely *interessellos*, uninterested. They connect to a carrier for a while and travel on and when they do, they have already become something else. In this sense, anecdotes are very much related to culture-bound syndromes, a topic that you have worked on. And we should definitely talk about this work, which for me is still curious, because we were both working on and writing about culture-

bound syndromes at the same time – and only found out years later. You in America, me in Europe. It was at a time when we didn't have much to do with one another.

This synchronicity actually happened twice: first, when we both started working on culture-bound syndromes as a strange form of contagious communication, and a little later, when I used the same two quotes or cut-outs for an essay that you used in your songs; about 'feedback as the model of power in the twentieth century'. You sitting in New York, me sitting in Berlin, and both of us not in touch at all – we hadn't seen each other for years. My memory is too shitty to be blamed for this rather contingent constellation.

HOFF: Were we really not in contact? It's funny that we were both thinking about it but not in touch – kinda goes against the grain of culture-bound illnesses, which are so often spread through dialogue.

KAISER: Yes and no, I mean, isn't that form of uncontrolled distribution exactly what we should talk about? Means of distribution that are not so much linguistic or language forms, maybe not even code in the strict sense. The integration of, for example, sounds into distribution channels or the integration of effects and functions into physical

or cultural organisms, say as syndromes, and the introduction of stories into discourses and speech acts – all these are strictly physical processes. They don't make a lot of 'sense' and they don't necessarily convey information. Material occurrences, events that do not follow a clear-cut code, but rather 're-produce' in a strong sense of the word: produce again. It's not so clear what they will produce. In other words: It is about intruding into and employing already existing systems of distribution, whether they consist of books, bodies, songs, colour, code, or poetry, to create relatively contingent physical effects. In order to fool around like this one has to inject little bits and pieces of concrete (or not so concrete) matter into existing channels and media to find weird ways of spreading, infecting, making them contagious. Maybe the bits and pieces come back or maybe they don't – ending up again in a song or a tune ... It's not really information that is spread here.

HOFF: It's good to note that there are a lot of variations in the different channels and systems you describe. Some are more controlled than others and some allow for uncontrolled, blind results, where a work can travel to unknown destinations more easily. It might also be good to distinguish between producers who actively attempt to manipulate an existing system to exacerbate a cultural

ghosting (where a cultural form produces or is transformed into a secondary cultural form) as opposed to producers who simply push work into a system and close the book, letting the system and the cultural framework of that system do the rest of the work (or not). I would align the former with advertising and PR campaigns and the latter with artists – though perhaps I'm speaking too broadly.

KAISER: No, not at all. I really like the term *ghosting*, because it describes an uncanny experience, if uncanniness is that which presents something familiar as something strange (and vice versa); for instance you to yourself as another. In the case you are describing, it creates a feedback and introduces a cultural or technological condition to itself in an altered form, something that *goes around*, strange and familiar, in regulated channels tweaked to produce unregulated effects that have an effect on the system itself. Whether positive or negative feedback reigns within a given system is a classic media theoretical (and political) question. Control or transgression? *Rausch- oder Regeltechnik*? Negative feedback directs an electrical current or signal back into a system to stabilise it, to make it hover harmoniously within itself. This was maybe *the* model of power in the twentieth century: self-regulation and stimulation. Positive feedback is what happens if you

leave the guitar too close to the amp, which in itself is not too interesting but becomes interesting once the two states start to oscillate. It's about triggering and regulating forms of uncontrolled feedback (you can't plan or map them because the mathematical complexity explodes instantly).

KAISER: To come back to poetry: one of the things that got me back then, around 2000, was that all the New York kids that I met seemed to be into poetry, even if they were doing art or music: at the end of the day they wanted to make books, or they wanted to make art that was somehow related to notions and concepts taken from poetry.

HOFF: Poetry as a cultural form is cheap and easy, which is the opposite of New York in general. By easy I don't mean that it is easy to write good poetry, rather the opposite. Poetry in a way is open access because it's dealing with a medium or material that most people have access to: language. How does that Desperate Bicycles tune go? 'It was easy, it was cheap, go and do it'? For me that's poetry in a nutshell. I never wrote good poetry, nor did I figure out why I ever wanted to.

There is also a long tradition of poetry in New York City, which still had influence over newcomers when I landed.

I'm thinking here of the New York School and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. The New York School essentially created Punk, or at least a few of its pioneers, Richard Hell, Patty Smith, Tom Verlaine, etcetera.

In my experience, writing poetry is tied to publishing. So many writers run small magazines and presses. It's a way into the conversation but also a way to support the work of others in the community. When I came to New York in the late 90s it was to write and publish; both endeavours were spurred on and inspired by the Meat School poetry movement of the mid- to late 60s.

KAISER: Working-class poetry, I guess they call it ...

HOFF: Yeah, that one. I came across a copy of Hugh Fox's *The Living Underground* during my last year in college and it was a big influence. It opened me up to another world of poetry/writing; one that could function in the same way that I understood music at the time: as DIY, or rather as a local, community-driven model accessible to anyone. I guess if I had really thought about it I could have figured it out on my own, but the book connected a lot of dots for me, aligning my working-class background with an overlapping cultural history and a model for writing that seemed possible. And then I moved to

New York and began publishing. Writing poems was simply the price of admission.

KAISER: The Loudmouth Collective.

HOFF: Yeah, The Loudmouth Collective, the name makes me cringe now, but I guess it's no *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*, for better or worse. For all my talk of community and accessibility, I really hated poetry readings. This was made worse by the fact that the prime spot for poetry readings in New York at the time was St. Mark's Poetry Project, a church turned poetry centre that has been active since the 1960s. I believe it was where the Black Mask folks mock-shot Kenneth Koch in 1967. They stood up with a fake gun, pointed it at him and he passed out – apparently all hell broke loose after that.

Anyway, I couldn't think of anything worse than being at a poetry reading *and* in church. Readings were too prescriptive, too precious; or more simply put, they bored me. The *Anti-Readings* were an answer to that; we wanted to re-approach the mode in which a reading could be delivered and by consequence, the manner in which an audience could receive it. They were highly inspired by Fluxus and were extremely decentralised.

Matvei (my aforementioned ghostwriter) once said that the gift of confusion

is one of the best gifts you can give an audience and that pretty much sums up the *Anti-Readings*. We took out the chair and the podium and everyone performed at once. The audience could do whatever they wanted. They were always loud and chaotic.

KAISER: A lot of your works are attached to systems of circulation and distribution that are already in place. They modify these systems from modes of consumption (that's why they are distributed) into tools of production. They do not only suddenly distribute a different content, but also alter the medium they circulate in, maybe even turning it into another medium, one that itself becomes a source rather than just a distribution channel. This for me links your current virus sounds and images to your experiments with poetry: selling one-dollar notes with poems printed on them for fifty cents; or stealing matches from restaurants, filling the boxes with text and putting them back. I remember the situation in which I first understood what you were doing: there was this – I can't remember his name – this old hippie poet who read poetry in cafés or bars, he was a friend of yours.

HOFF: A poet in Berlin?

KAISER: No, no, in New York, and you were disturbing his readings while sitting

in Paule's Metal Eck in Friedrichshain, an awful bar by the way.

HOFF: Pretty sure that was Steve Dalachinsky. Disturbance and agitation was always part of the game back then and Steve always welcomed it.

KAISER: I always tell this story in a certain way, in which you habitually disturbed the readings of this old hippie poet in various ways, one of which was sawing typewriters in two with a steel saw while the poor man was trying to read his poetry. So this time, the guy had a reading in New York, while you were in Berlin. You bought a cheap mobile phone and a phone card, called me and our dear flatmate and friend Lars up and we went to what was probably the worst hard rock bar in town ...

HOFF: Sounds about right, though the typewriter incident was technically at one of Matvei's readings. Typewriters are tougher than they look by the way ...

KAISER: Yeah, you know, when I tell it, I never mention the name anyway. I hope that the story never makes it back to Matvei or Steve ... You somehow convinced somebody at the reading to hook up the phone connection to the sound system in the café in New York, so instead of the guy reading his poetry, we were sitting in Paule's Metal Eck in Friedrichshain with the Scorpions or someone banging

in the background, shouting their lines in awful German accents, which on the other end came out as a pretty decent wall of sound. That's what I was talking about before: How to use systems that are already in place – mobile phone connections, poetry readings, bars, amplifiers, speakers, poetry books, German tongues, a couple of beers, and the sound of a crappy German hard rock radio channel – to create disturbances, introduce systems into each other, and come out with a noise that is far less controlled than the stuff it started out as – and, if possible, produce a strong physical effect.

HOFF: I like how you theorise it, but at the time I would have just considered it being a drunk punk. [Laughs] It really was about disruption and causing a creative rift within the status quo of expectation. In the end it's going to be like a record skipping; the audience notices because it pulls them out of their lull, even if they hate what is produced or what's producing it.

It is also true that I was thinking a lot about distribution models; thoughts and concerns that came from the coupling of writing/creating with that of publishing which requires engaging with such channels. A lot of these concerns come from my engagement at the time with artists' books as well, which, from the