

Towards the end of the 70's, at an early stage in his artistic journey, finding himself in completely uncharted territory (which he continued to explore for over 30 years, discovering hidden nooks even in the last years of his life), Rolf Julius happened upon a door yet to be opened, and it was up to him to find a way to unlock it for the first time. A moment of great intensity, which required a lot of courage with no certainty whatsoever of achieving a result, also taking into account the fact that the destination was unknown. Julius indeed had that courage, and his works in those years are fundamental. After the photographs of the "Ecken [corners]" and the "Rücken [backs]", came the Feldman-like photos of the "Dyke Line", along with its twin, "Body horizons": the former inspired the epoch-making "Deichlinie [again, Dyke Line, in German]", thanks to its first truly personal sounds, as will be the case with "Gray Music #1", and "Aktion Valencia Strand [action on Valencia beach]". Julius finally took his decisive step in 1979. He started working on a series of black and white photos – the "Dyke Line" – taken in Northern Germany, in an area of levees close to the Baltic Sea, and not far from his hometown, Wilhelmshaven¹: the pictures of the landscape are minimalistic (and small in size), just the earth, below, and the sky, above, set apart by two different tones of grey; these images were later modified during the printing process, by removing the upper part, i.e. the sky. Julius had already used the sound element in 1976, for "Rücken", which was halfway between photography and performance, though in this particular case, it consisted in a presence external to the work, a mere soundtrack to an action (which took place in Bremen, in the open air: the artist invited the passers-by to enter a booth and place their bare backs against a small window, thus obtaining a frame for a photographic shot). In "Rücken", Julius used the recordings of American musicians from the Sonic Arts Union (Robert Ashley, David Behrman, Alvin Lucier, Pauline Oliveros)², at the time, basically unknown pioneers of electronic music research. In this particular work, "Deichlinie"³, for the very first time, sound – an extremely simple one, such as the jingling of a tiny bell, alternated with moments of silence, and intermittently playing first from a speaker on the right, and then from one on the left – belonged to a composition created by Julius himself, and became an essential part of the work, taking on a position that was as relevant as the image itself. As a matter of fact, in "Deichlinie", image and sound are not only simultaneously present, but they interact as if by osmosis, in order to stir in the onlooker a peculiar perceptive phenomenon, in which his gaze – following the acoustic signal coming one moment from one speaker, the next from the other – somehow activates a sort of movement in the images. It was the turning point in his career, which spanned from the mid-70's to the beginning of the current year. Then came the Berlin Concert Series, *musical actions* held in the open, over a twelve-month period - between 1981 and 1982 - which took place in front of a limited circle of friends and acquaintances, in various places around the city which were familiar to the artist, and

¹ The landscape of Wilhelmshaven was the one that influenced Julius' vision the most, permeating a great deal of his initial work, and even finding their way into details of a naked human body, which resembled stretches of land disappearing into the distance. Then came the woods and the lakes around Berlin, before Japan – which he visited for the first time in 1985 – and above all, the sea, the woods and a particular little pond in Finland, subjects of many photographs and videos towards the end of his artistic career. Extremely loved, as was the light of those places, peculiar throughout every season of the year.

² These 'muddy' and disharmonic sounds had an obvious influence on the composition of the pieces that accompany two works created between 1979 and 1980, "Aktion Valencia Strand" and "Gray Music #1".

³ René Block chose this work for the great exhibition of 1980 "Für Augen und Ohren", at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin.

particularly cherished by him, like a park, a frozen lake, the ruins of a bombed house. In Julius' very words, his intent was to "dedicate music to all these places" and to thus offer the onlookers both the music and the landscape ("the music along with the landscape", again in his own words), which were experienced by them each time through their senses (not only sight, but also hearing and touch) in a totally new way. On these occasions, Julius set up – still rather rudimentary, given the times – "broadcasting systems" for his open-air *small music* (such as common sealed speaker boxes and tape recorders, which were obviously battery-powered), interacting therefore with the sounds of nature in its broader sense, including the noise of the passing cars or of some aeroplane flying above, as well as the noises and sounds of animals and plants and the voices of the people present. In 1982, with "Musik in einem Stein", Julius took another fundamental step towards the evolution of his research, by endowing a stone with sound, thus inaugurating the first in a long series of similar works. The prototype was created quite accidentally, in a classic case of 'serendipity', typical – by the way – in its recurrence, of his intuitive and decidedly non-conceptual approach. Julius had been musing for some time on a way to get sound inside a stone, in order to animate the inorganic, somehow bestowing upon it some vitality, a soul, so to speak. One day, in his studio, he found himself holding a small speaker in one hand, and a big paving slab in the other. Somewhat absent-mindedly, he moved one arm towards the other and placed the speaker on one side of the stone, in such a way that the sound was emitted directly *against* the stone itself. A tiny yet decisive movement, that finally opened before him a much sought-after road, which he pursued throughout his lifetime. In 1983 he was artist-in-residence for a year at the PS1 in New York, and this gave him the opportunity to pursue his own unique research further with greater creative freedom. In order to create minimal installations - which varied in size but often bordered on the invisible - he started combining discarded iron or fragments of plaster fallen off the old walls of the building with small 'open' speakers (a procedure first experimented by Takehisa Kosugi, a great performer whom Julius always considered his mentor), or common glass jars half-filled with water with a small speaker floating on top. After these first incredibly intense years, his research never stopped evolving, and was defined by his rigour and his curiosity for new experiments (also as far as the more technical - or rather - technological aspects of art-production were concerned). Important acknowledgements followed, such as documenta 8, in 1987, and many solo exhibitions in museums around the world. His activity as a musician and a performer, in perfect symbiosis with his activity as a visual artist, also continued to evolve, and on 15th March Julius was supposed to give a performance with his *small music* in the Rothko Chapel in Houston, in front of the great canvases of the American master, whose work Julius certainly admired. It could have been the crowning achievement of his career, but unfortunately it was not to be, since destiny had already decided to put an end to his time before that date⁴. So, I like to think about what he did in 2009, at the Triennial Exhibition in Setouchi, Japan, an audio-installation in the woods, "Trees (listening)", which was documented in a video I saw, and that seems to me like a sort of manifesto of his views and an actual fulfilment of his research (and I think he thought the same). Artificial sounds blended with the ones in the woods, of insects, of the rustling of leaves, of little birds, appearing equally natural. In my opinion, a great work of art, set up with the utmost studied carelessness, with that *modest grandeur* that always defined him. This installation (which reminds me of the beautiful, mysterious photo of "Music for a large meadow", in 1981, where, instead, one has the impression that lots of people are blending in with nature) is reminiscent of the "Great Piece of Turf", as marvellous and simply natural as Dürer's watercolour⁵.

⁴ Rolf Julius closed his eyes forever on 21st January, 2011.

⁵ Please see further on in the text.

Anyone who had a chance to visit one of the countless installations created by Rolf Julius dating back from the beginning of the '80s onwards can't forget the sound that issued forth, and the magical experience which took place each time, transforming the place, somehow *creating* it. Sound, in his installations, served exactly that purpose, it was one of the elements which cooperated, along with the others, towards the creation of a landscape, and this very *Landschaft/landscape* is, in my opinion, the theme, the key to his entire body of work. In each installation different objects occupy a space, and they are sometimes positioned closer to each other, and sometimes farther away, and many emit their own sound: all together they make up a landscape, a place where the physical distances between the objects that dwell within are reduced, or even nullified, by the sounds, which travel effortlessly through space. This particular aspect of his work became immediately clear to me, at the time of his first exhibition with e/static in 2001: what decidedly illuminated me on the matter was his account – during a private conversation – of the nature of the landscape surrounding Wilhelmshaven, his native town, which stretches out in every direction as a flat expanse, and where even the most distant sound can travel with ease. Julius uses sound to connect, to bring closer to one another things that may be otherwise far apart, separated by a distance, which that very sound is able to nullify, in the same way we may be able to communicate with someone far away from us, but who may be reached by our voice, by simply speaking louder.

If one pays close attention, all the musical compositions by Julius (or most of them, anyway) start and end suddenly, in a manner similar to dreams. They seem to be extracted from extremely dense material, creating, basically from nothing - through elaborate and complex procedures reminiscent of a cook using various ingredients to prepare his dishes - hitherto unheard sounds, making them sound perfectly natural. Julius convinces us, if only for one moment, that the ash in a vase, or in a cup, has its own voice, and that a little dirt gathered in a corner, or scraps of rusty iron on a small plate, theirs. For that brief moment, we, the viewers of his works, unwittingly but inevitably regain the perceptive faculties we once had as children (the very ones that Julius never lost), who are naturally able to see things beyond any cultural superstructures: such as when the tiniest thing becomes enormous or vice-versa, and objects, indeed, start to talk – one can hear their voices in various versions of “dirt”, and under glass panes or iron plates, in the water inside several cups, that alternately contain powder pigments, ash, vegetable seeds. And children are always more inclined than adults to appreciate his acoustic works, approaching them, kneeling down, and instinctively bringing their ears closer to them. They never seem to raise the question many adults are afflicted by: “what does it mean?”. On the contrary, they have a natural inclination towards establishing a contact with his works, and connecting with those objects (which doesn't necessarily mean they *understand* them...).

If one were able to isolate the many tracks that make up Julius' pieces, they would turn out to be 'speeches', which by juxtaposing (and overlapping), create a musical effect.⁶ It's the same phenomenon (*glossolalia*) which one can observe in small children, when they start 'talking', and their sounds are meaningless only to our ears, because they actually use them to describe and communicate, with the same expressiveness they would have if they were to use a more 'evolved' language, which they start using around two or three.

This ability to make things talk, to make them able to speak to us, even if we can't understand what they are saying, has to do with one of Rolf Julius' fundamental qualities, first of all as a person, and then as an artist: his profound humanity, his compassion (literally) for all living creatures, animate and inanimate. Anyone who was fortunate enough to meet him, to talk with him for a while (even in English, as I always did, a language that was 'foreign' to both of us) always discovered this precious quality, his great respect for others, for whoever he was speaking with, regardless of their social or cultural background,

⁶ Written while listening to “music for a distance” (small music n.2, Western Vinyl, 2011).

he always tended to see their virtues, even when they weren't that apparent. He was equally respectful towards plants - which he loved very much, and which took up vast areas of his apartment - and towards animals, towards all things, especially towards the ones people generally don't notice or appreciate: the porphyry slabs one usually walks upon, the dirt that gathers up, a product of our very existence, always bound to be thrown far away from us, as we do with ash; and certain places nobody notices, like the corners of a room, between two walls, or between the wall and the floor.

Speaking of plants, while observing some of Julius' work, I was often reminded of that exquisite little watercolour by Dürer, the so-called "Great Piece of Turf", at the Albertina in Vienna. In this particular painting, one can see some meadow plants (very common and therefore rarely appreciated) painted with extreme care, with true love, as familiar - yet hardly unworthy - instances of the amazing wonder of Creation. Caspar David Friedrich himself, another great *loving* interpreter of the landscape, talking about a painting of his, once said: "God is everywhere, this time I painted him as that bush". Julius' God (unlike the extremely religious Friedrich, he was an atheist, and didn't subscribe to any revealed religion) is in those cups filled with ash or water, in those cobblestones collected sometimes while strolling around, in the dirt gathered in a corner. It's funny how this aspect of Julius, his profound, innate humanity, his care towards others, never seems to emerge from his work, which lacks the presence of human beings. That is, with the exception of the details (indistinguishable from the dunes in "Dyke Line") of a human body in "Body Horizons (Portrait of N.)", or the similarly limited detail of the legs of Sonja, along with the backs belonging to the people portrayed in the "Rücken" series: all photographic works dating back to the second half of the mid '70s.

Rolf Julius' gaze, to quote the title of a recent exhibition of his, is always (metaphorically or actually) "turned downwards", and is able to recognize the existence and importance of things which are usually marginalized, or even excluded from our attention, not taken into consideration, or which literally go unnoticed though they may stare us right in the face. Like a child, Julius can see reality in a pure and direct way, going beyond the cultural screens and conventions, in order to get closer to the essence of everything, and to everyone. His gaze is one of extreme sensitivity and 'compassion', and it has the ability to find the dignity and beauty even in the most humble and neglected objects. Just like in the song of the grasshoppers and of the commonest birds, the sound made by a small piece of iron rubbed against a stone slab, the wind, the vibration of a glass pane caused by the sound of a speaker propped against it. And also all those sounds he created starting from a simple mechanical noise, transformed - after countless subsequent recordings with the *reel to reel* technique - in hitherto unheard sounds, oddly fascinating, which he combined, in his own unique, inimitable installations, with cobblestones, plastic cups, powder pigments, glass panes, soil.

Julius asks us to steer our gaze *humbly* towards what we usually ignore or despise, even though it may accompany our everyday life, and he uses his small bizarre sounds to take us there, inviting us, with the same sober kindness that defined his person, to bend down towards some soil spread on the floor, or towards some cobblestones picked up from the roadside. He invites us to share in his experience, to appreciate its value - a great one - able to change our outlook on reality: all of a sudden, it seems very different from how we imagined it, as the hierarchies of thought fade away, hierarchies that had unwittingly infiltrated our minds. From this perspective, Julius' art acquires philosophical depth, almost nonchalantly, yet with great effectiveness. This happens precisely because his attitude isn't affirmative or ideological, but propositional, as if he were offering us a small, yet priceless, gift.

His art is of an 'organic' nature, it's defined by change and growth, deterioration and evanescence: plants, dust, rust, water. And the objects or things that we generally consider inanimate - stones or ash, pieces of iron or glass - chosen, collected and, finally,

manipulated by Rolf Julius the craftsman⁷, so as to turn them into art, participate in this mutation, just as living beings may do, and from which one can now barely tell them apart. It's a sober and measured kind of art, there are no images that are too 'strong', nor excessive weirdness, let alone monstrosity: in other words, it's a classical type of art, since Julius, like Giorgio Morandi, Samuel Beckett, Giacinto Scelsi, Kazimir Malevich, Robert Walser or Kawabata Yasunari, transcends his own time, with its fads and fashions. The onlooker can directly experience his art, skipping any cultural superstructure, without the knowledge of which, most of the works of what we call 'contemporary art' (the art of the last 50 years or so) wouldn't be able to exist, since their *representative* nature would doom them to be misread and misunderstood.

Paraphrasing the title of a novel by Kawabata⁸, one could say that Julius' work was always defined by *beauty* and serenity, and that there was no trace of *sadness*, since his art was of a realist, but not pessimistic, nature, permeated with a great love for life, in all its manifestations. An art which is at the same time ephemeral and eternal, which is brought to life again and again each time someone happens upon it, listening to and looking at the majestic small music of Rolf Julius.

Carlo Fossati, 2011 (translation by Valentina Maffucci)

⁷ Julius always created his works using his own hands, with no mediation, hands which he used skillfully, with accurate and loving craftsmanship, as any artisan around the world may do.

⁸ "Beauty and sadness [*Utsukushisa to kanashimi*]", edizioni Einaudi, Torino, 1985