

Voices Found Histories of Vocal Improvisation Interview Collection

Chris Tonelli Interview with Jaap Blonk November 8, 2013 in New York City, U.S.A.

CT: I thought it might be nice to start by talking about very recent history and then go back and talk about the beginnings of your practice. You performed last night with a variety of other improvisers in the *Snugs* concert series in New York City. What moments from last night's performance stood out to you?

JB: I remember, starting with the very last collective performance we did, we were supposed to, well, improvise with the whole group and at some point I noticed that the dancer wasn't participating so I went out to her and started sort of talking to her in gibberish and trying to get her involved as well, and it worked, so it was a nice moment. And one of the moments I recall was the electronics improv with Jeff Snyder and Sam Pluta, which I think was pretty hilarious and worked well. There were actually quite a few nice moments. A lot of different things happened. I think it was quite a good, creative night of improv going in a lot of directions.

CT: That moment with the dancer stood out with me as well. It seemed like there was a politics to the fact that at the end everyone was performing together and you noticed the one performer that wasn't participating and you made an effort to get them involved. I'd like to talk about the politics of your practice, but first I'd like to sort out what terminology I should use for your vocal practice. I often use Paul Dutton's term soundsinging. Do you like that term?

JB: He's coined a few, I think, useful terms. His one CD is called *Mouth Pieces*; actually I was quite envious of that title.

CT: Ah, why is that?

JB: Quite a few sounds don't have to do with the voice in the sense that the vocal chords are not involved, just air pressure. But it does happen in the mouth, so that's a more general title.

CT: How about soundsinging as a term?

JB: Yeah, that to me is less useful because you could also just call it singing and someone like David Moss says, "everything I do is singing." We should widen the definition of music by telling that music is organized sound and singing is just anything produced by the voice, well not ordinary speech, but anything that is meant to be art or music.

CT: Okay, I'll use the term vocal improvisation then. A lot of vocal improvisers seem to have an aspect of their practice where they're spending significant time inviting others into the practice. I'm thinking of Phil Minton's *Feral Choir* or Maggie Nicols' *The Gathering*. So that moment last night kind of struck me as similar—you weren't

specifically inviting her to vocalize but there was politics of inclusivity at work. Could you talk a bit about that aspect of your practice? You seem to be willing and interested in performing with any other improviser. There seems to be a politics of inclusivity to what you do.

JB: Yeah that actually goes back a long way. I benefited greatly through the politics of inclusivity of other people when I started out as a vocal improviser in the early 1980s. I was in Amsterdam and there was a really open and vibrant community of improvisers then, involving many dancers as well, and many small improvised performances still stand out for me involving also some musicians who had recently come to stay in Holland from North America like Michael Vatcher, Tristan Honsinger, Michael Moore, and also dancers. So there were quite a few small venues where people would gather and improvise, and for me it was a very fruitful environment to develop my vocal vocabulary and flexibility. So it has always been for me, right from the beginning, very inclusive, and sometimes there were visual artists involved who would make drawings or objects in real time.

CT: Have you done vocal workshops in a manner where you're helping others adopt some of the vocabulary that you've worked with?

JB: Oh yeah, very regularly, focused on improvisation or more towards specific extended techniques, also focused towards writing, strategies of writing sound poetry, notation, and so on. It depends on what institute or what people would invite me.

CT: Could you tell me about some of the vocal workshops that you've done, how you structure them, and how people have responded?

JB: I usually start with some simple games and improvisational things. Sometimes people are really shy and you have to sort of gently push them and get them to lose their shyness. Sometimes people are already advanced and very spontaneous and I try to introduce somewhat more structured improvisation because when the spontaneity and the intuitive improvisation is already there I try to go towards more formal stuff. But it's not so much about vocal technique in this area. There's no standard technique, like for instance bel canto, or specific jazz styles. People can do different things and it all depends on the motivation of people and what for them is fun to do. I try to give them ideas and open up new alleys and new vistas for them, rather than focusing on specific techniques. I give a few useful exercises usually.

CT: Is that something that you think attracts you to this as a performance medium? The fact that there is no sort of hierarchical way of learning it?

JB: Yeah for me actually that was very liberating when I discovered this area. Also for creating new pieces, you can set your own rules for every new piece and no sound is excluded. This I'm very happy about. And sounds that many people would consider ugly or even inappropriate can be used here.

CT: That's something I am thinking about a lot, why it is that many vocal sounds are considered ugly or inappropriate. You tell stories about having beer thrown at you while performing the *Ursonate*. I read another story in one of your interviews, where you performed the *Ursonate* in a formal concert hall and the audience reacted strongly.

JB: It was a formal concert hall in Amsterdam, the Concertgebouw, in the chamber music hall. It was actually a nice move of a program for them. They had this subscription series where you have four or five concerts through a season, so you get a reduced price and you go to all those concerts, and usually they have a theme. The theme was the sonata, in general. At every concert some chamber sonatas were played, or piano sonatas. So the *Ursonate* was sandwiched between a Bach sonata and another classical piece, I don't remember which. So people were the typical audience for a subscription series, like elderly well-to-do people, the bourgeois, more women than men. So the atmosphere was sort of formal, like a chamber music concert, and so they didn't dare to laugh: they started taking their handkerchiefs and covering their mouths with them.

CT: Have there been other moments in your career where those kinds of worlds have come together or where an audience has reacted to your work in a way that it seems like there was an early dismissal or an attempt to control it or to police it?

JB: Well I remember performing sound poetry on the streets in Amsterdam mainly where kids were very interested but their mothers would drag them away from this man who's mad and so on. And actually I once did a performance with a few dancers in the zoo in Amsterdam where we could, someone had arranged it, do a performance in a cage that was temporarily empty. So we were performing there, doing different things, and a lot of kids who had come in and started throwing their lunch bread at me. [laughs]

CT: It's such a complicated issue I think in vocal improvisation, how calling it animal sound is sometimes a way to dismiss it entirely. But to perform intentionally in a cage you're almost embracing the connection between those sounds and animal sounds. How does that resolve for you in your mind?

JB: It was just an energizing experience I remember. It's not necessarily resolved. More generally, these sounds are not to be considered art or music in any way. Yeah, I've encountered that prejudice or attitude a lot.

CT: Do you have a theory of why these sounds can be threatening? Why people make efforts to not include them?

JB: Partly because they're disquieting, or the idea that "well educated" people don't do that anymore. I remember doing a project about sound poetry and vocal improvisation in elementary schools in Holland and, so, well, after these lessons we had the kids talking to each other in gibberish and making a lot of fun with sounds, but then some mothers came to pick them up from the school, immigrants like

Turkish and Moroccan people, and they said, "Our children are in this school to learn proper Dutch, not for this nonsense."

CT: Maybe we'll switch now to talking a little bit about the origins of your practice. Could you tell me about your musical life before you took up the saxophone? The different ways that music was a part of your upbringing when you were young?

JB: My upbringing was in a very strict, rigid family. Calvinist, if that means anything to you. So, basically there was just church music, and, well, I remember my father had some other records, but anyway I wasn't allowed to listen to pop music. At some point I got myself a small transistor radio probably when I was 13 or 14 in the mid 1960's, listening in my room quietly to those radio stations that were playing, this was just the era of Beatles, Rolling Stones, Bee Gees, all those bands of that era. So when I went to university to live on my own, one of the first things I did was go to the local music school and choose an instrument that had nothing to do with that background, as little as possible. It was the saxophone. So when I was 20, I started playing saxophone.

CT: So when you were 20 that's when you went to Utrecht for university?

JB: Yeah, 19 or 20.

CT: 1973.

JB: And also, I had never really heard most of the existing music, even classical music. So in Utrecht they had a very good library, also a music library where you could borrow LPs, and so every week I came home with a stack of LPs, mainly classical music which I heard then for the first time, and I systematically listened to all the Beethoven piano sonata symphonies, string quartets, Bach, whatever. And it was a very intense experience for me at that age, and later on I listened to jazz, first classical and bebop jazz, and gradually I moved towards free jazz. And this was in the late 70s, I had this friend, we were both very much into the free jazz, we listened for whole nights to that. And so this, of course, affected my way of what I was trying on the saxophone and I drifted more towards free improv trying to make all the possible sounds on the instrument. And at the same time I started to read poetry only when I was like 23 or so. And read a lot of poetry, and then stumbled in a workshop upon some sound poems by Hugo Ball, and those were the first ones I memorized and performed, in a small performance at the end of that workshop.

CT: In your period of discovering classical and popular music, were there unique vocalists you were drawn to? Do you think you have any vocal influences from those worlds?

JB: No I wasn't drawn at all to vocal music and in classical music, I didn't like it. It may have to do with my aversion to singing in the church where the singing was really horrible and very slow. When I was very young already, like 8 or 9, I didn't want to sing, but my mother told me many times you should sing, but I didn't. So, no,

neither in classical music nor in jazz was I interested in that time in vocal music, it was much later that I came to that.

CT: Your early aversion to singing, it seems common to young men, do you think it had something to do with masculine self image?

JB: Well, the only kind of singing I was confronted with sounded really horrible to me. It had nothing to do with masculine or macho image, no. I could sing one line of a song, like it would be in that church [he sings a very slowly ascending then descending melody where notes are sustained for four beats and intervals between notes are small] That's just one line. There was no rhythm. Every syllable should be the same duration. I had a brother who became an organ player, and at some point he was allowed to play in the church. At one time he played a Bach prelude and that was way too frivolous and he was fired. Too many quick notes. So as a kid, in order to sing one line you had to breathe probably twice to finish that line. And then it was of course way out of tune and sounded really horrible to me.

CT: So you broke with Calvinism at an early age?

JB: Yeah. At a fairly early age, well you know the belief in the family was everything in the bible is literally true. So I found so many contradictions that I couldn't believe that anymore.

CT: Did that cause a rift with your family?

JB: Yeah, there was a long time that I didn't see my parents much and they never expressed any concerns with what I was doing. They never came to a performance.

CT: Was your family working-class, middle-class, upper-class?

JB: Well my father was a milkman so, I don't know what you would call that. It's not working class because he had his own business, but still it's not upper-class of course either. There was this family business that had been started in 1860. And as the eldest son I was destined to be a milkman too, but then I had other ideas. Actually my father had to sell, or stop the business in 1975 because the whole trade doesn't exist anymore. Supermarkets came up. Nobody goes along the houses anymore with milk.

CT: Do you think class identity plays a role in your artistic choices at all?

JB: Well I think in the sense that being responsible for your own business, that plays a role for me. I was at a young age, from the time that I was 7, I was helping in the business. So I had my own bag with money and I could go to the customers and calculate how much they had to pay, and take the money and things and change. And also seeing my father doing the weekly calculations and seeing how the business was going. So, yeah, that certainly had an impact on me.

CT: Do you think you, maybe, desire to be involved in a practice that is not accepted by the bourgeois? Do you think that has a connection to your class background?

JB: Well, no, not so much. Well, maybe a little bit in the sense of making your own decisions. Maybe not in the nature of the practice but in the practical aspects of choosing your own working hours, choosing what I'm going to include in my practice and what not and so on.

CT: Okay, so, in 1979 you're in this workshop course where you discover Hugo Ball. Can you tell me a bit about that course? Was it a part of your university studies?

JB: Yeah, it was actually 1977 I think. Maybe I've quoted that wrongly in an interview, but I discovered it was '77. Well, there was a wide range of material offered in this workshop from very classical poetry to experimental. I remember I did also some German expressionist poems by August Stramm, who was a poet who wrote about the First World War, and these were expressionist in the sense that they were still understandable language, but a very stilted, very intricate grammar. And then the next step was the sound poems. Yeah, so those two categories I was drawn to. And in 1979 I heard the Schwitters *Ursonate* for the first time.

CT: Was this course part of your university studies?

JB: No, I was just shopping around, so to say. After quitting mathematics, I took several different courses in the creative field, some theatre things, some things about creative body expression or whatever, you know in the '70s there were lots of this kind of stuff you could do. And most of these were either for free because I was still formally a student or they were very cheap.

CT: Was that in Utrecht?

JB: Yeah.

CT: Okay. What years were you actually in the university? 1973 to?

JB: Well actually from 1971. I briefly started in '71. I finished high school in 1970. And for one year I had various jobs and in '71 I started at the technical university in Delft. I wanted to be a civil engineer, but then I didn't like that at all. After three months I decided to quit and change to math and physics in Utrecht. So that was in like December and I couldn't get into that year of the curriculum but I could do some side things that started later in the year. So in '72 I started as a first year student there. And then I had my bachelors in 1975, and then before that classes were in a large building where you had also physics and astronomy, some chemistry stuff and so on, but after '75 I chose to do pure mathematics and that was in the math department. And there I saw the mathematicians in their rooms and for one side I was very much attracted to pure mathematics, I had the motivation to work on a problem until like deep into the night or through the night, but also I felt like I didn't want to become like these sort of really introverted grey type of little men. And also I was sort of afraid of being working on things that maybe 20 people in the whole world will understand, you know. Besides that, I was getting very much interested in literature and music and I was very bored by the usual talk between mathematics students and instead in the breaks I was reading poetry.

CT: Do you remember in that workshop course who taught it? And what the institution was?

JB: Yeah, it was a man called Aram Adriaanse. I think he had only just graduated. Later he became a fairly well-known theater director in Holland.

CT: And do you remember who performed the *Ursonate* when you saw it in 1979?

JB: Oh yeah, it was a student of the Arnhem theater school by the name of Hans Hausdörfer. He was reading it. Actually, later on I heard that there was a teacher, a professor at the theater school, who used the *Ursonate* for vocal exercises for the actors.

CT: Was that in Utrecht as well?

JB: No that was in Arnhem. I was still living in Utrecht but I had a collective with three other people. We were writing poetry and we had made a collective scrapbook of our poetry, the four of us, and so we got some invitations to read at poetry events throughout the country, and one of those was in Arnhem. So we read our poetry there and there was this guy reading the *Ursonate* at a bar in Arnhem. So, I wasn't writing sound poetry then. I was writing regular poetry. Sometimes romantic or a little more experimental sometimes, but still in Dutch.

CT: Your story that you often tell in interviews where you performed the *Ursonate* for the first time after working with it on your own for two and a half years, do you consider that your first performance of sound poetry?

JB: Yeah. Actually that's true, except for that little thing in the workshop in 1977. So yeah, this was 1982 I think.

CT: And had you moved to Amsterdam by then?

JB: Yeah, I moved to Amsterdam in November of 1980.

CT: I wanted to ask you what the important performance spaces for you in this period were, in Amsterdam or Utrecht. What were the venues or institutions that you thought were very influential for you, or gave you a space to explore, or led you towards your practice.

JB: Well what was very important for me was the work with a group of students of Dutch literature at Utrecht University where we made programs of poetry and music. Not our own poetry but poetry by, usually, well-known Dutch poets. I was not reciting poetry. They thought I didn't do it very well, or I did it in a strange way, or I don't know. I was playing saxophone and composing all the music for those programs. We did quite a few performances, usually in student societies or at a theater as part of university programs. This was very important for me to develop my music and also one important thing was that I could compose any kind of music that I was considering appropriate for that, so it didn't have to be in a certain style. Like, if you have a band you're supposed to play a certain type of music, otherwise

you wouldn't get any gigs. But in this context I could use any kind of music. I started to experiment with other styles of music like atonal music, using random things, aleatoric music, more towards modern classical, and some jazz of course as well. And I also put some poems to music. There was a woman in the group who sang with them, and there was a pianist, we had a cello, and later on a violin also, so there were some instrumental possibilities. And, this was only when the personnel of that group had partly changed and moved to Amsterdam, then at some point we made this program of Dada and Surrealist poetry, and there were a few texts that none of the others found a way to do, so that was when I made a breakthrough as a vocal performer of poetry on stage and I did some Schwitters, not sound poetry but the "An Anna Blume" poem, for instance, and some Artaud, also not sound poetry but translations of French texts, which were pretty extreme texts. This was a seminal experience for me. We had a director for that particular performance who sort of pushed me, "Jaap, you can do more on stage. You can cross the border of what you think is madness and don't worry because there is authenticity in what you do." So that helped me a lot to lose any fear of doing whatever I wanted to do on stage. And I noticed that people wouldn't turn away from it, they saw apparently it was something genuine, so I was very much helped by experiencing that.

CT: Those moments where our practice gets legitimized by people we respect are very important ones, so it's interesting to hear about that moment and his sense of your authenticity in performance.

CT: Could you tell me about why you chose to move to Amsterdam?

JB: I sort of grew fed up with Utrecht. I had seen everything and there were several ex-girlfriends who I couldn't help meeting in the small town. So I wanted to escape to something bigger. Amsterdam is not a big city either, but it's a lot bigger than Utrecht.

CT: The group in Utrecht, the music and poetry group, did you perform in Amsterdam? Did you go back and forth? Or was it exclusively in Utrecht?

JB: The group was changed after I moved to Amsterdam. I was one of only two members of the Utrecht group that stayed. We performed some other towns, but mainly in Amsterdam.

CT: So once you moved to Amsterdam, what were the important spaces or institutions?

JB: Well, I entered musicology there. That was from 1980 to 1983. I did two and a half years, I didn't do the whole curriculum there. I learned harmony and counterpoint, some music history, some ethnomusicology. One of the more interesting things was a teacher, a professor of world music, who introduced us to many types of music from other cultures, and he was also the leader of the gamelan ensemble. There's a tropical museum in Amsterdam that has very beautiful gamelan instruments from, I think, the late 19th century. So I was in the ensemble for a few years. We had weekly rehearsals and a public concert every first Sunday of the

month in the afternoon so there was always a big audience with lots of kids. That was nice. And another important thing, most of the important things were not really in the curriculum of musicology, but I met some older students who were very much into music of John Cage, Morton Feldman, and the whole North American experimental field. And I didn't know much of that, but they were very active in not only studying that music but setting up concerts. Like, they would have a 24 hour concert with many simultaneous performances of works of Cage and also Satie's *Vexations*. So that was important for me. And then also I met this trumpet player Angelo Verploegen who I worked later in Splinks with and we got to be very good friends. We had this trio with a piano player who had good versatility and we established this trio, regularly rehearsed, and did some concerts. And that was important too. I had a very productive time writing pieces, mostly in a jazz or more experimental jazz field.

CT: And then, as you tell the story often in your interviews, there's this moment where you put on an Archie Shepp and Roswell Rudd record and sang along to it.

JB: Yeah I think it's One for a Quarter, Two for a Dime? What was it? Two for a Quarter, One for a Dime? Yeah, that live recording. And then I broke into vocal improvisation. It's true, that happened. Actually it happened when I got home in the afternoon after doing a vocal workshop with some actors from Poland who were students of Grotowski. So it was a very physical voice workshop I had been to, and then that happened after.

CT: The workshop was a one day workshop?

JB: I think it was a weekend. I think it was two days or two afternoons or so. I think it must have been like a Saturday and a Sunday or something like that.

CT: Was there any kind of similar vocalization in that workshop?

JB: No it was not towards vocal improv it was more towards sound.

CT: Sound in what way? What was happening?

JB: [laughs] I don't remember.

CT: You were just energized somehow from that.

JB: There were lots of physical exercises. It was more about loosening the body and thereby freeing up the voice I think.

CT: And what were the next stages then if that was the kind of genesis moment for you as a kind of vocal improviser, adding vocal improvisation to the sound poetry practice that you had already established? What were the next steps? How did it creep further into your practice?

JB: As I mentioned before, I had many chances to improvise with instrumentalists and dancers in Amsterdam. So I noticed that instrumentalists of different kinds

found it interesting and stimulating to improvise with me and dancers also, so I had many chances to develop it, and I began to incorporate it. I had a band at that time with two horns, I was playing saxophone, and this trumpeter I mentioned, with guitar and double bass and I started to incorporate vocal improv in that also, and a little later to write some vocal parts in the music, gradually.

CT: So you would incorporate it a bit into your band. Were there other ways, other spaces you'd explore this beyond your band?

JB: I didn't do really much solo improvisation yet. But I began, from the mid 1980s, to make little pieces of sound poetry. Some of them were partly or just improvised. Some had some texts which grew into a sort of sound poetry cycle called *Songs from Heaven (Liederen uit de Hemel)*. And from about 1985 I started to do performances of that. I had at that time performed the Schwitters *Ursonate* in many places already and I got invitations to do performance of my own work, so I had opportunities to do that.

CT: And you started incorporating solo vocal improvisation into those?

JB: Yeah, mostly it was pieces, but some pieces were partly improvised. Some pieces were pretty harsh vocal sounds. Part of it was this *Der Minister* piece that I sometimes still perform, and there also was a dedication to Artaud where I was wearing a hat and then I would pretend I was sitting in the hat and looking at it and admiring it and singing about it, and some people found that pretty shocking. I had many reactions, even promoters that said, "This guy shouldn't be allowed on the stage." [laughs]

CT: So it seems like there's these three sides to your practice. There's composition in a jazz idiom, sound poetry, and then vocal improvisation. When you're going between these worlds, are there parts of your practice that aren't accepted in certain environments or can you bring that into any of those three worlds?

JB: Well I think nowadays its pretty much accepted. Or, well, when I perform in a regular literature festival or poetry festival I notice still that there are many poets who don't accept what I do. They think I shouldn't be in this festival. That still happens. It happened much more in the beginning

CT: Do you think that part of that has to do with the fact that you're also a vocal improviser?

JB: Maybe.

CT: Is that the part they dismiss?

JB: Maybe they don't even hear the difference between doing a sound poem and improvising. Even when I do the *Ursonate*, many people are quite amazed when I tell them that this is all a text that I memorized, that I didn't make it up on the spot.

People still tend to think that. Even though this is so tightly structured piece as the *Ursonate*.

CT: Do you remember the first time you publicly did a free vocal improvisation?

JB: Yeah. The first time was with my band when there were no vocals yet in the band, and this was not very long after this breakthrough in my room with the free jazz record. At some point I was to announce the next piece we were going to play and instead of doing that I got into a vocal improv. Even my own band members were sort of worried. I remember the trumpet player coming to me and saying "Are you okay?" [laughs]

CT: Did you do that frequently after that? What was the next step?

JB: Well, I think the next concert was a while after that, and I had maybe written a piece that incorporated vocal improv.

CT: Okay. At the time of the Archie Shepp moment you've said that you weren't really aware of other people doing vocal improvisation. Could you tell me about discovering others? Who were the first and what were your reactions?

JB: I don't remember the first time I heard another vocal improviser. I do remember hearing the Four Horsemen in 1985 and I think they did this European tour. I had heard some other sound poets like Bernard Heidsieck in Amsterdam. I remember a poetry night in Amsterdam, I think it was even earlier, in 1981 or so, where they had John Cage not on stage but reading on the telephone from New York. He read some of *Empty Words*. But I think the first vocal improvisation I heard must have been David Moss. He came to Amsterdam rather frequently in those days. I didn't hear Phil Minton until much later. I think this concert of the Four Horsemen didn't involve much improvisation at that time. There must have been some, but it didn't strike me as very strong in that way. I wasn't very impressed by the vocal abilities of them at that time. But I think Paul Dutton developed as a vocal improviser much more after that.

CT: Do you remember seeing David Moss for the first time? What were your thoughts and reactions?

JB: No, I don't remember the actual opportunity, but of course I have some image or some idea what he sounded like but I don't remember the actual occasion.

CT: Did seeing other vocal improvisers encourage you to do more of your own vocal improvisation? Or already it was a large part of your practice?

JB: Other vocal improvisers never have been that important for me. Well, of course it's nice to realize that apparently it was a more or less accepted form of music, form of expression.

CT: I'd like to talk about humor. When I spoke with David Moss, we talked about how being funny was very unaccepted in a lot of the jazz circles that he was a part

of. I think some vocal improvisers incorporate and embrace humor in a way. You certainly do in your practice. Other vocal improvisers sometimes shy away from that. Have you worked with other vocal improvisers that preferred to avoid humor, or other instrumentalists, perhaps, that kind of rejected humor as an element?

JB: Yeah, I've come to work instrumentalists on some occasions who didn't accept my things in a way that they started to imitate me in order to make fun of me, yeah.

CT: What draws you to work with some of your closer collaborators, someone like Maja Ratkje, for instance?

JB: Oh, well, Maja Ratkje contacted me back in 2001 when she was still just beginning with her vocal improvisations and I remember she sent me a tape with an improv with Paal Nilssen-Love, the drummer. She asked me what I thought about it. She had heard my *Vocalor* CD. And I liked very much what she did. There was this sort of freedom, and I think that that's a very rare in female vocal improvisers. She had no fear of being not elegant, she actually is still the only female improviser who I've seen touching her face and making sounds [makes unvoiced cheek sounds] like that. Later that year, 2001, she came to Amsterdam. She was already more established as a modern classical composer and a piece of hers was played at a lunch concert at De Ysbreker in Amsterdam. So I went there and, I knew the place, I had arranged that we could use a rehearsal space behind the concert hall for a while in the afternoon. So I brought a recorder and we recorded some duo improvisations and this went very well from the beginning, and some of those pieces are on our first duo CD. Over the years we have done more performances and also both of us including electronics in different ways. And, yeah, I've enjoyed very much working with her. I think of all the vocal improvisers I've worked with, I've had the most affinity with her.

CT: Your comment about facial manipulation in female singers is very interesting. Gender is an interesting aspect in vocal improvisation. One of the moments that stood out to me last night was the moment when Kyoko Kitamura started singing and in a kind of bel canto style, and you imitated that timbre right after. And she had an interesting response, she stamped very hard on the floor to kind of stop you. Do you remember that moment?

JB: Yeah.

CT: That for me is fascinating. It's almost like she perhaps perceived a kind of mockery of her bel canto singing?

JB: Oh it certainly wasn't meant that way. I was meaning to add like a second voice to that in a good sounding way.

CT: These moments and exchanges are fascinating. Maybe we could do a few questions about the experiential aspects of vocal improvisation. One thing I'm asking everyone I speak to is a question I get asked a lot. It seemed like a strange question to me at first, but I came to realize it does speak to one experiential aspect

of vocal improvisation: What's the role of mental images when you're improvising with your voice. Do you see anything in your mind?

JB: No I don't. And when I first started out, I did.

CT: Oh really?

JB: And also in performing some sound poetry. Yeah I did, but not anymore.

CT: What did you see before?

JB: More like imagining myself doing certain action like a fight, mostly seeing myself in certain actions or being in certain circumstances like a strong wind, or rain. Yeah, I remember. Or imagining speaking to a great crowd, things like that, mostly involving myself in typical action.

CT: When you improvise you have your eyes are open almost all the time it seems. That's kind of rare. A lot of vocal improvisers, close their eyes. When you started, did you always have your eyes open as well?

JB: Yeah. It's sort of natural for me to always be aware visually of the surroundings. I don't criticize people who close their eyes, it's probably natural for them to do that.

CT: Do you understand why these images stopped?

JB: Well, it's because of, I think, more and more concentrating on the sound. I had several experiences working with theater directors where I was asked to do certain actions and make certain gestures, in order to make the story, in servicing the story, but I began to feel that that was not my thing. It felt like it just wasn't true. I had to deal with sound only. So more and more I tried to restrict that and do only those gestures and facial expressions that were either necessary to produce sounds or come naturally with the sound. For instance, I still notice when I'm doing very fast improvisations that my hands go like this, almost as if playing saxophone. Also maybe the formal research I've done in phonetics and how to relate certain sounds to specific speech sounds or starting with speech sounds and developing and pushing them into other directions, it has influenced the way I deal with it. Well, sometimes in solo improvisations I mentally see some structures, like a network where I have to choose certain paths, or even a mathematical series. I will force myself for a short period to do utterances that, for instance, have the number of syllables of a mathematical series I'm visualizing. But only for a short period. And then that will help me get into a certain direction and then work again more intuitively from that.

CT: Okay. Emotion? Does emotion play a role ever?

JB: For me the only emotion is the joy of making sound. It's not very healthy if I would feel strong emotions on stage. That wouldn't work. I notice when I see performers who obviously have strong emotions and try to put them into their work, it doesn't feel good for me. I tend to turn away from them.

CT: Do you know why you tend to turn away from that?

JB: It's just not interesting. Raw emotions are the same for every person. We all have sort of the same emotions and if you don't do anything with them, if you just present them to other people, well you should do it to your best friend or your partner or so but not to a general public.

CT: But audiences probably interpret your performances as if you are experiencing profound emotions.

JB: Well, they are hopefully are experiencing profound emotions, but that is only because of the form I give to my performances and the intensity that I am working on the sounds. And the more I can put into that, the more emotions the audience will feel.

CT: I've read in your interviews that part of your practice at some point was imitating the sounds in your environment of animals and machines and cities. How does imitation play a role in your performances?

JB: Not so much in the performances. Imitation has played a role in finding new sounds, mostly. And for me the use of imitation is to not to realize a perfect imitation, but to find new sounds to add to my vocabulary.

CT: Can you tell me about some of the experiences you've had where that's been the case?

JB: Yeah, well one of these occurred that this tram in Amsterdam, in this place where I lived, every three or four minutes I would hear the squeaky [vocalizes multiphonicly] sound and I started working on that. Noticing that I could develop inhaling high register [vocalizes a sustained high ingressive squeal], sort of strange extra high register, that came because of that imitation. Same thing for the low register, trying to imitate low machine sounds and also maybe musical instruments that go much lower than the human voice like the tuba or some notes on the trombone. And finding that I could work that out into [vocalizes low damped egressive phonation and low ingressive sounds], that's good for getting more facility, inhaling in the low register, that came also through imitation.

CT: When you happen into those sounds when you're improvising, are you reminded of those moments, those sources, or do they feel like your sounds?

JB: No not anymore. They're sort of a natural part of my vocabulary.

CT: Are there any moments in your vocal improvisations where you feel like you're intersubjectively communing with an external source?

JB: Oh yeah. It happens that there's some external sound, yeah. Or, for instance, somebody will come into the room, an audience member coming late and I will sort of talk to that person while improvising, address that person in a gibberish welcome.

CT: Are there times when you feel like you're occupying someone else's body, like you're taking on a character?

JB: Yeah, I'm not planning it but sometimes. When I get into movement, like dancing, I start feeling like I had a smaller and lighter body, or when I make sounds like [vocalizes a low roar using a glottal trill] and go down to the floor it's more an animal feeling. But I don't use those images in order to produce them, it's more like I'm following from the sounds, I think.

CT: What other thoughts can you share about your methods and the experiential aspects of using your wide sonic vocabulary?

JB: An interesting mode of experimentation is just trying out movements of the vocal organs, the mechanics of the mouth, which came about after my studying of the International Phonetic Alphabet.

CT: You've done that very systematically. It seems like you've almost mapped the entire vocal apparatus. And you have notations for the most minute shifts in oral articulation.

JB: More or less, yeah.

CT: That mapping process must have opened up all sorts of micro sound worlds that you explore. How do you find your improvisatory practice changed after you went through that research?

JB: Sometimes I consciously work within a very limited range, for instance going back and forth between [vocalizes a range of subtly different sibilant sounds]. So as you say it is very detailed, working with small details. One other thing that is maybe also related to that is when I started working with electronics it was first with hardware effect gear and then with samplers, and then later on with a computer. I also started working with things I had recorded and trying to alter them and so on. At first I was a vocal performer and used to being very active on stage, trying to capture the audience, keep them interested the whole time. Then the activity of sitting at home in my home studio and listening to something, pushing the fader or turning the knob a bit, was so different from that but that also came back to my vocal practice. Like one of the things, this cheek synthesizer, I got interested in changing timbres very gradually, like [performs a cheek trill with one finger manipulating the active cheek, slowly he moves the position of the finger, changing the dynamics of the airflow in the cheek and the subsequent sound]. Something like that. It's very similar for instance to having a filter and turning it, trying to change the sound gradually a little bit. So I got more interested in that.

CT: One other thing that I'm curious about is the moment where you decided to stop playing saxophone. What influenced that decision?

JB: As soon as I started improvising with the voice, I felt that that was my main vehicle for expression and I stopped doing saxophone solos. Except I was playing

just for fun in some jazz bands, playing at bars and so on. I still played jazz tunes and did solos on them. But I was very much aware that that was just entertainment music and nothing to do with my actual practices as an artist; it was just for fun. But then in like 1994 I had my first North American tour as a vocal performer, which was 6 weeks and I even brought a soprano saxophone to try and keep practicing, but then that didn't work. I was mostly staying at people's homes and sort of not wanting to torture them with soprano saxophone sounds. I noticed that I couldn't keep up the saxophone practice and it was not my main instrument anyway, so I thought I better stop it, it's going to be frustrating. I was very much aware that I would never be a really good soloist on saxophone.

CT: In many of my interviews, discussions have touched on the divide between jazz and free improvisation, how a lot of musicians who consider themselves jazz players are very suspicious of free improvisation, and vice versa. Did those types of divides play a role in your career, as someone who has occupied both of those worlds?

JB: Yeah I don't like that at all. I remember playing with BRAAXTAAL in the Nickelsdorf Jazz Festival in the last phase of BRAAXTAAL, after the third CD, *Dworr Bunn*. After that, for the last few years, we only played free improvised music. But there would be grooves and in this festival that was not accepted at all. None of the other improvisers would ever introduce anything that could be remotely considered a groove so they were looking at us on stage [makes incredulous face].

CT: Is that part of your motivation? You continue to make groove oriented music, your minimalist techno for instance. Is part of your motivation to push your listeners into being more accepting of both groove based and non-groove based musics?

JB: Well, I want to have the freedom to make what I enjoy and what I want.

CT: But that general reaction, that disapproval of groove oriented music, was something you didn't like?

JB: I find it very narrow-minded. And much of that improvised music was very boring for me also.

CT: Are there other instances of limitations you've found in the different worlds that you've occupied? The sound poetry context or the jazz context, for instance.

JB: I think the sound poetry context is, if such a thing exists, it's not a context that is, very much, institutionalized. Well, when I first entered sound poetry a long time ago, that was one of the main things that I liked very much, that there are no rules. I can do anything. And, yeah, occasionally I've worked in contexts where more straight jazz players were also involved and some of them were very open and liked what happened and others couldn't do anything with it. I performed at the Donaueschingen music festival and there I got their collection of reviews and some of them were really outrageous and said, "Well this guy, Jaap Blonk, maybe invite

him to your birthday party and give him 20 euros for making a funny performance," or something like that. Just dismissed this as nonsense.

CT: "A funny performance," maybe this was a policing of your use of humor.

JB: Well, yeah, or the use of any vocal sounds that they couldn't possibly accept as musical. There were also very good reviews, just not all. Some people praised it as very original. But, some, quite a few of them, were really dismissive.

CT: Do sound poetry contexts still have that kind of openness that you mentioned?

JB: Yeah, well, I haven't been in a sound poetry context in a long time. When was the last sound poetry festival I participated? I don't remember. For a time there used to be dedicated sound poetry festivals. Like in 1993 in Stockholm and 1994 in Berlin, but not lately. There was one thing in Frankfurt a few years ago, but then there were also ordinary singers.

CT: In the more general poetry or literary contexts that you perform in, do they have that openness or are there restrictions in those kinds of spaces?

JB: Well, there are other poets and writers who like it very much and are open to it, and others who are dismissive and still see it as something their two-year old daughter can do in a better way.

CT: That line of thought always strikes me as odd, that thinking that deems performances irrelevant if there's not a kind of long path to virtuosity. It's also odd when unconventional vocalists display a virtuosity and audiences still mark the performer as incapable because it involves sounds they associate with animals or, in this case, children. Do you ever perform with children?

JB: I've done workshops where I've performed with kids. Yeah, sometimes.

CT: You seem to perform, like I said at the beginning of the interview, with people of many different levels, and we talked about inclusivity at the start. Could we also talk a little bit about the economics of your practice? Do you support yourself fully off your art? If so, when did that start for you?

JB: This started when I was about 40 years old. So I had started out when I was about 30 and for a long time I still had to support myself with various different jobs. I remember doing a theater project and then being on unemployment and social security money for a while, then odd jobs again, for a total of about ten years. Generally there was not enough acceptance for what I did; I was rejected from both music contexts and literature contexts until the first solo CD I did, *Flux de Bouche*, was very instrumental in helping change that. I sent out a lot of those CDs, also to North America. I think the way the CD was done, with the booklet and the scores in it and the reference and the clear placement in a context of historical sound poetry including some Dada and some Fluxus work, I think that helped a lot for me to be more accepted both in music contexts and in literature contexts.

CT: The kinds of tours you seem to plan in North America involve performing in plenty of small arts spaces. You seem to be very supportive of small, local arts communities.

JB: Yeah this works in two directions. For me, when I plan a tour there are some places that pay me a somewhat better fee. But if I go to another continent, to North America or to Australia, my performances there are usually somewhat far apart. I have to fill up the days in between, if even because I need a place to sleep. So there are two aspects of that, I like to perform in small venues because the gratitude of the people and the openness and you usually meet very nice people there, but also I need them because they offer me a place to sleep and, otherwise, I would end up paying for hotels and the whole tour wouldn't be possible economically.

CT: Is it radically different in Europe and North America?

JB: Yeah, in Europe it doesn't exist so much, doing a whole tour, performing every night at a different venue. Some people manage to do that, but it's much harder. Our promoters are relying more on government support from either a city or a province or a state. There's not so much initiative of promoters for getting a good crowd and making sure that the door will be a good enough amount to pay the artist. That's not so strong in Europe. So things are much less flexible. A venue will have a certain number of concerts in a year, maybe once a month or so, and if you approach them saying I will be there and then, maybe a specific date or a choice of a few specific dates, they probably mostly don't have a possibility, or they have already planned a season, or it's not their day, for instance they have the third Thursday of the month only. Here in the U.S. it's much more flexible.

CT: How about support from the Netherlands? Your career's been quite long, and there must have been eras where the arts policies in the Netherlands were different from one another. What kind of support have you gotten from the national arts funds in different periods?

JB: Well, there was a time when I started out with this band Splinks and also BRAAXTAAL when there was a system that you could have your music judged by a committee of musicians, and this was specifically in the field of improvised music. And if they judged your music of a good enough quality and also interesting and innovative, then there would be a government subsidy so that half of the fee would be paid by that and the club would only have to pay half of the fee, so it was more attractive to clubs to get that kind of music. This system was gradually destroyed in the course of the 1990s, but still I've had some government support to make productions. Notably, in 1996 I did this performance "*kré (Homage to Artaud)*" and got a good subsidy to make a multimedia piece and do, I think, four performances in Amsterdam, inviting theater programmers from around the country. But only two of them bought it; it was considered too strange. So that's also been a problem for me, sometimes I manage to get money to make a production, but then I couldn't sell it. I have had, over the years, small grants for composition and also travel support, like most recently to go to Australia and New Zealand. I got travel support from the

Dutch government. But the possibilities have diminished as there have been huge cuts in government support in Holland for the arts. So it's not so good anymore.

CT: Has the arts funding policy ever influenced your path artistically?

JB: I think that in the 1980s and the first half of the '90s it helped me develop things. But I am also aware that in Holland and in some other European countries also that there are many improvisers who tend to play a kind of music that is watered down, made more accessible to the general public because they have a chance, if they do that, that they just might make enough money to make a living combined from subsidy and from the public. In the United States that doesn't exist. The improvisers here that are playing a more pure type of music, because they know that they won't make a living on it anyway so they just play what they want. But in Europe there are many musicians I see who have made their music less interesting by sort of pushing it a little bit towards popular demand. Also, because there's been changes in the criteria for subsidy, this has radically turned around now. In Holland, you get subsidy if you get a bigger audience. That's totally wrong in my view. In the beginning, when I started out, there was subsidy on artistic grounds and, especially, if there was not a big audience. If the form of music needed the subsidy to develop, then you would get money. But now I have seen procedures for subsidy where there are five criteria for giving it and only one of them was artistic. The other was like, "Do you have a good business plan? Do you get many concerts? How many people come? Do you reach minority groups? Do you cover the whole country?" So things like that. They are much more important than the thing itself.

CT: Have you ever been tempted to live somewhere other than Holland?

JB: Well, I'm very much tempted to leave the country, yeah. It's not so easy to see where. Especially when I will get the general pension for the retirement money, then I could probably easily afford living somewhere else and would still get that money. I can't see myself staying; if it goes on this way, I certainly would not want to end my life in Holland. In this interview I recently did for Roulette, I'm literally saying, "I'm ashamed of my country now." Yeah. So all the xenophobia there is and the bourgeois attitudes and the inimical attitudes of the general public and politicians towards art. The secretary of state for culture, when he announced that he was never reading difficult books, he liked more like, what's the crime author of the... what's the name again? *The Da Vinci Code*. Yeah. Those are the kinds of books he reads. [laughs]

CT: And his anti-academic attitude wins him popularity. It's terrible. Well thank you so much, Jaap, for your time.

JB: Well, pleasure Chris.