

Marker of Reality – an encounter with Chaz Underriner

By Marko Ciciliani

What connects Chaz Underriner with artists such as Pauline Oliveros, Robert Rauschenberg and Ryan Trecartin? They were all born in Texas, but made their careers outside of it, as Chaz told me in a personal conversation. While you can't necessarily tell from the work of the artists mentioned that they are from the south of the USA, this is probably the case with Chaz's music, an aspect that he is well aware of and which is important to him.

This is also clearly evident in the installation he created for the TONSPUR_passage. If you listen to the 25-minute soundtrack, it begins with a guitar solo by Chaz, played on a semi-acoustic fretless guitar – a very rare instrument. "That's MY sound" he says, which expresses his personal relationship to this instrument. The soundtrack ends with a composition by Chaz, which he wrote for gospel choir. The recording is taken from a rehearsal in which Chaz rehearses the piece with the Stetson Gospel Choir. You can hear conversations and comments in between, clearly identifiable as a "African American Vernacular English" as Chaz says. Such sounds, which carry a multi-layered context, are particularly valuable to Chaz. He refers to them as "markers of reality", borrowing the term "marker" from the composer and sound ecologist Raymond Murray Schaffer, who introduced the term "soundmark" as the sonic equivalent of "landmark" in his book "Soundscape".

"Markers of reality" are representatives of a reality, a quality that Chaz often contrasts with an abstraction or surreality in his work. The voices that we perceive as commentaries during the gospel rehearsals clearly show how much the sound of a voice reveals about a person: their age, gender, nationality, but also their demographic and cultural background and much more. Both the guitar solo, which is strongly influenced by the blues and especially by the playing style of Thelonious Monk, and the gospel composition are expressions of Black US culture, which is particularly present in the south of the USA and of great importance to Chaz. "Markers of Reality": for him the anchor of his personal identity.

Between the blues solo and the gospel choir – which sound directly one after the other when the soundtrack is looped, as is the case in the installation situation – we hear soundscapes of different origins, most of which Chaz recorded during his residency in Vienna, in part specifically from the position of the Passage soundtrack and from the window of studio 7 looking at the Passage. Some of them are heavily filtered, which is part of the abstraction that is important for Chaz's approach to composition.

In addition to the „instrumental“ and the “environmental”, the “visual” is the third pillar of Chaz's work. Video plays an essential role in many of his compositions. In this work, we encounter the visual in a series of seven posters set up in the passage. They also visualise the distinction between the real and the abstract. For example, we see one that shows the frame of a window, although it is not clear whether we are looking from the outside to the inside or vice versa. However, the shape of the window refers to a different spatiality. As a series, the posters show particularly clearly the interplay between depictions of a reality and abstractions, with various nuances in between. The square shape appears in all of them, as colour fields reminiscent of Joseph Albers, or as the concrete frame of a window.

Mimesis as a "simulation of a reality" is an important topic for Chaz, on which he not only wrote his dissertation, but has also published various texts. For him, sonic realism forms an anchor in perception and a point of reference for the audience, to explore other realities

from there, "the other side" as he calls it with reference to the author Haruki Murakami. For Chaz, the "markers of reality" form a point of identification for the audience that evokes memories and has emotional content. This allows listeners to establish a personal connection from which they can then experience the more abstract worlds, "the other sides", without completely losing touch with reality. Because - as Chaz warns us by quoting Murakami again: "If you stay over there for too long you can never get back to reality."