Yanik Soland in Conversation with Ines Tondar

IT: *Walking on Rubber Eggshells* is your first major institutional solo exhibition at Kunsthaus Baselland. Let's start with the new sound work of the same name, which you spent several weeks composing and recording. It will be released as an LP and is both the centerpiece of the exhibition and what ties it all together. What does your compositional process look like? In your case, collaboration and improvisation often play an important role. You also work with an extensive and constantly growing sound archive that is central to your practice. What kinds of musical sketches, sounds, or melodies do you collect?

YS: I spend a lot of time in my studio recording and archiving sound experiments and improvisations on different instruments. The idea of having an archive means I can find something meaningful in every experiment, because I know the sounds might come in handy later—for a film soundtrack, for example, or music for a theater production. I also archive all the recording sessions I do with musician friends. I often dissect those recordings and reuse small excerpts in completely different contexts. For my new solo album, which grew out of this exhibition, I had a pretty clear idea of the sound I wanted, so I invited three musicians to my studio for short recording sessions. With the flutist Phoebe Bognar, for instance, I just set up the microphone and let her improvise. It wasn't until I started composing that I listened back to the recordings, edited individual passages, changed pitches, and built new melodies from them. I find this way of working with the archive really inspiring because I'm never starting with a blank canvas.
So the composition is a mix of archival material, improvisations with other artists, and additional material recorded specifically for it, such as a choir or a Japanese koto.
When I was composing the album, I had the spaces at Kunsthaus Baselland in mind, but it was also important to me that the music could stand on its own. I'd built the compositions out of lots of individual parts, so for the exhibition I took them apart again and reassembled them as a separate soundtrack for the galleries. I wanted the individual sounds coming from different speakers to play asynchronously, so the soundtrack is constantly rearranging itself and can be experienced throughout the different galleries.

IT: Could you say a little more about the sound you initially had in mind and how the particular qualities of the space and architecture informed it?

YS: The spaces at Kunsthaus Baselland are very reverberant and weren't designed for playing loud sound. The acoustics are a little like a church or a warehouse, where working with precise, rhythmic sounds can be challenging. That's what first led me to think about working with voice and choral elements. I also wanted to make deliberate use of silence and pauses, so that individual sounds could unfold over time and move through the galleries as echoes, taking on a more physical presence. Japanese court music was a major inspiration for that. Individual beats are placed very precisely, while flute and string sounds are given the time and space to unfold within the acoustics of the room.
One of the new instruments is also directly integrated into the architecture of the Kunsthaus: a steel string runs through an existing wall, and the position of the hole in the wall determines the pitch of the string.

IT: The archive you draw on for your many different projects—whether listening sessions, performances, concerts, theater productions, or film scores—must be pretty extensive by now. How do you organize it? Is it chronological, almost like a diary, or do the sounds themselves determine the structure?

YS: I mostly archive things chronologically, with the title and number in the file name. I start a new folder for each year. Then I have another folder where I collect exports from different music projects and divide them into categories like "Soundscapes," "Melodies," and so on. If I've already used a sound in a project, I mark that export in red and make a note in a separate text file of which excerpt I used and where. The system still works pretty well for me, but I'm slowly realizing I'll need a new one at some point so I can find specific sounds more quickly.

IT: You've created several new groups of works specifically for the exhibition, which come together as a sonic landscape on the upper floor. Can you walk us through the different galleries?

YS: In the first gallery, I designed an air-filled sculpture based on the idea of changing how the acoustics of the space feel. The sculpture has a very low ceiling that visitors have to walk underneath, so the acoustics immediately feel completely different. There's also a speaker behind the sculpture that makes it vibrate at irregular intervals. Each of the other two galleries contains a homemade wooden instrument with built-in electronics. They're both constructed a bit like electric guitars, with pickups, steel strings, and guitar amps, but they're inspired by the Japanese koto. The instruments will be activated during two performances, but they're also "active" during regular

exhibition hours. The guitar amps remain switched on, which means that the instruments can sometimes pick up visitors' movements and set the strings vibrating.

IT: As you've written, the exhibition works both as a setting for the two live performances and as something visitors can experience on its own, without you there to activate it. What interests you about these two modes existing side by side, and what particular challenges or possibilities does that create? The layout, for example, means that during the concert you won't always be able to see one another and will sometimes have to respond to each other almost blindly?

YS: I'm very interested in playing with control and the loss of control. One of the reasons I love improvising is that you have to make so many decisions so quickly that there's no time to question your own ideas about aesthetics or sound. I also like the idea that the exhibition takes on a life of its own without me activating it, and that every visitor experiences their own individual soundtrack.
Eye contact will play a big role in the performance, especially because the first one will take place during the opening, which is always a pretty hectic environment acoustically. I think a lot of the communication will happen through listening, with different performers giving musical cues at different points.

IT: In your recordings and live performances, you often play a range of instruments, some of which you've designed and built yourself. At what point does an object take on a sonic character for you, and what gives it that quality? Are there particular forms, materials, or volumes that you keep coming back to?

YS: I'm generally interested in shifts in scale—for example, using contact microphones to make small instruments sound large and present. Often they're objects that were never intended as instruments in the first place, but that I turn into instruments through small modifications or additions. For example, I turned my grandmother's tabletop Zen garden into a mini koto by stretching rubber bands around the little box and wedging clothespins underneath them as "bridges" so I could change the pitch. I've used that instrument in different contexts, including during my music studies, and kept trying to get as many different sonic qualities as possible out of its very limited possibilities. What makes an object particularly interesting to me is when it can produce different pitches while also allowing for more abstract sounds. Materials that keep coming up include rubber bands, various tools such as spatulas, tuning forks, small rakes, and brushes, as well as inflatable objects, objects with holes, and colored glass. With colored glass, I sometimes forget for a moment about what I want the object to do sonically and simply let myself be guided by the beauty of the glass.

IT: Before we wrap things up, could you say a few words about the title *Walking on Rubber Eggshells*?

YS: I wanted a title that describes a sound but also changes it—in this case, by silencing it. I've been interested in the expression "walking on eggshells" for a while because it describes a social situation in musical terms. In the exhibition at Kunsthaus Baselland, footsteps on the floor can sometimes activate a sound, while touching something can change it. I'm interested in that fragility and in how it encourages you to become more aware of your own body within the exhibition and more attuned to even the smallest changes.