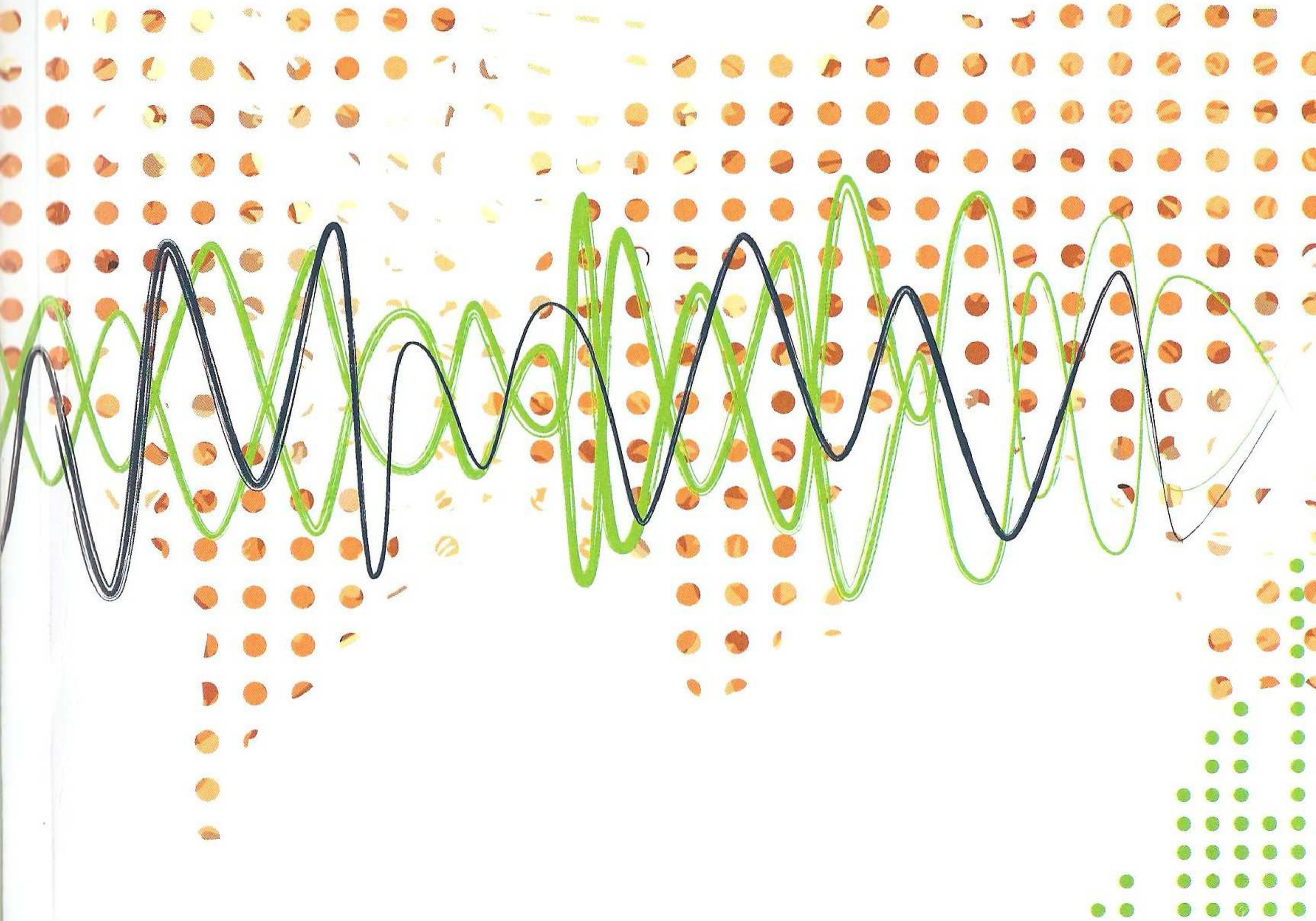
the global composition

July 25–28, 2012 | Media Campus Dieburg | Hochschule Darmstadt

Presentations | Discussions | Workshops | Concerts | Installations | Soundwalks

Conference on Sound, Media, and the Environment



Sabine Breitsameter
Claudia Söller-Eckert (Eds.)

proceedings

h_da
HOCHSCHULE DARMSTADT
UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES
fbmd
FACHBEREICH MEDIA

The Global Composition. Sound, Media, and the Environment
Darmstadt-Dieburg/Germany, July 25 – 28, 2012

Matthew Herbert`s *One Pig* and the ethical reality of sound-recordings

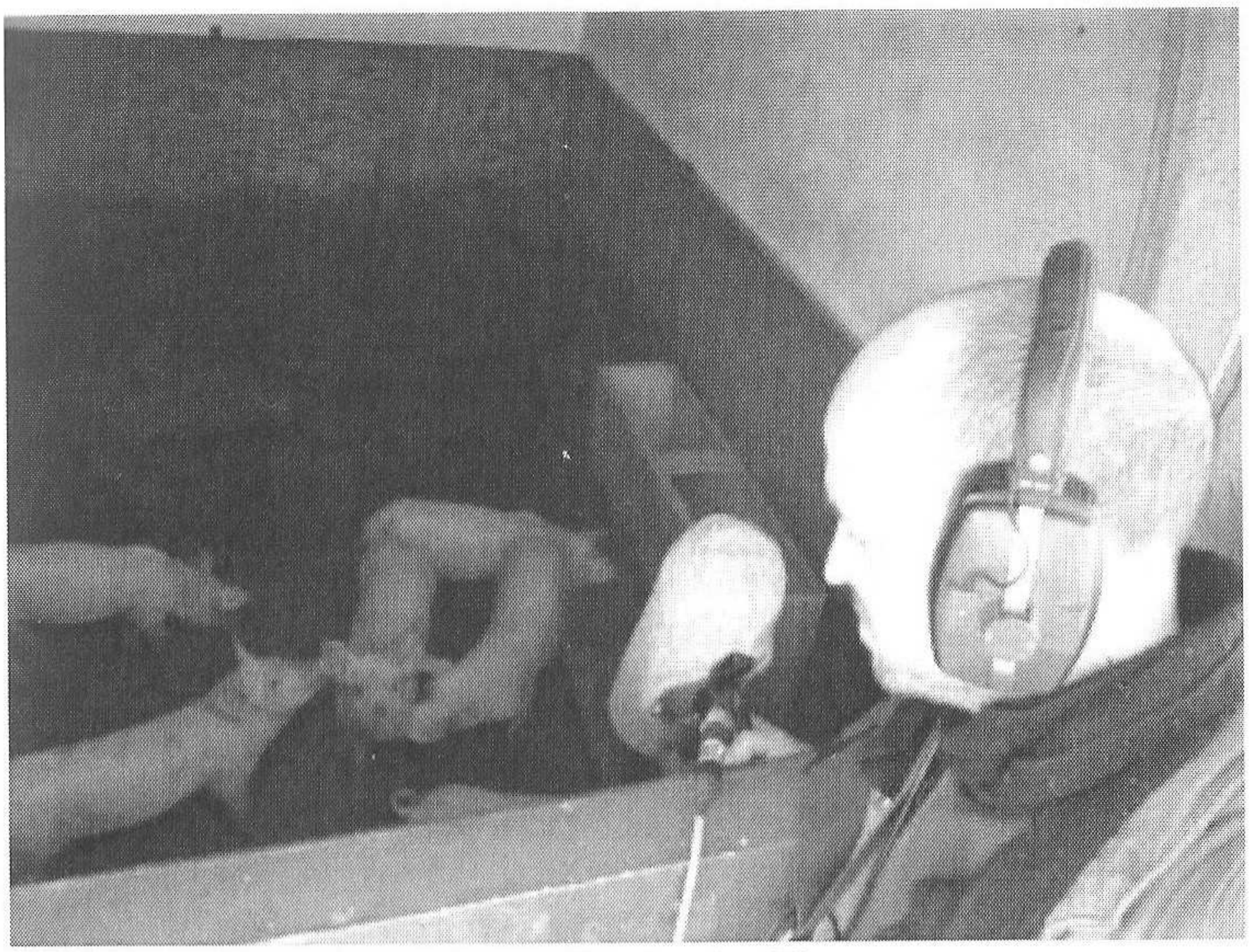
Bastian Zimmermann
(Bastian_Zimmermann@web.de)
Frankfurt, Germany

ABSTRACT

Based on the album *One Pig* (2011) by Matthew Herbert, where he recorded the life of a pig from birth to slaughter, including the meal, this essay will elaborate some more basic considerations on the relationship between sonic realities and their utilization and functionalisation in the construct of "music". Ostensibly Herbert composed a pop-cultural narrative, a chronology of the events of birth, life, death and even sadness. At the same time Herbert discusses in terms of a (meta-) narrative the creation-process of music, i.e. a pop-musical construction of the narrative of the pig's life. An intensive listening of *One Pig* offers significant up to provocative ideas that go beyond the current discussions of sound ecology, that primarily deal with the careful handling of sonic realities (soundscapes). In *One Pig* the common use of pigs is doubled into the artistic actions of collection/ appropriation, order/alienate, compose/imagine interference and real treatment of the pig by eating and making instruments of the pig-material; the often very one-sided and fixed ethics of sound ecologies diffuse into a lebensweltlichen context of ethical complexities, where the listeners (and viewers of the Herbert-concert) have to (not only) position themselves aesthetically and ethically.

ONE EXAMPLE, THE PIG IS BORN

Herbert composed an album full of sounds of one pig – from birth to death including the meal, building instruments of it and the sorrow afterwards. The tracks of the album are structured in the chronology of months: Five tracks from the birth in *august 2009* to the death in *february 2010*, the meal in *august 2010* and the song of sorrow performed in the piggery in *may 2011*. Seen from this point of view, *One Pig* seems to be a naive or sarcastic narrative of a pigs life. However Herbert is telling something different: Not an objective narrative which is in the material, but more the artistic exposure with the more or less arbitrary material. The tune/attitude of the artist's actions in making music with these sounds and materials becomes the subject of the tracks. [1]



Picture 1: Matthew Herbert is recording the pig. [2]

One example: *august 2009*, the birth of the pig. The track begins with a diegetic soundscape of the piggery. At the first moment you hear nothing. You turn up the volume and hear the noise of the recorder, the space and the clucking of chicken. The senses are getting alert. After one minute you hear a snuffling with an echo-effect. Than the mother-sow snuffles irregular, rustling of straw, again filtered snuffling. The snuffling is getting louder and more regular. Finally it is pulsating. Are these the rhythmic labor pains of the mother-sow? Or is it a loop made by Herbert? Here we lie in the dirt next to the birth of a pig and the birth of music.

Second example: *february 2010*, the death of the pig. Herbert did not get the permission to record the killing of the pig. So in this track the pig is already dead and we hear the dripping of blood, the sawing of bones and the cutting of the flesh which is directly culminating into a straight techno-track, i.e. into a music with its own imaginary space, where the origin, the reference of the sound-pieces vanishes. With the death of the pig, the music comes to itself.

SOUND-RECORDINGS...

What do we learn from this ambivalent experience while listening to the birth of a pig and the birth of music as well as to the death of a pig and the living (not death!) of music at the same time?

At first there are some pre-conditions that have to be clear: -

Music is only possible because of instruments. Instruments are build for their instrumentalisation. All instrumentalisations are accompanied by a process of neglecting the origin – something like the original use – of the object; now it`s an instrument. A lot of different objects can be used as an instrument for making sounds (viola, hammer etc.). A Sound-recorder is not an instrument (except throwing it on stone). It is a medium through which we perceive the world in its own mediated way. So the objects of the recorder, the

world is becoming our instrument; not in using objects like playing viola, throwing a hammer or killing pigs on stage. More in using the sound of the objects where it`s unclear how the objects got into the recording. So it's not a behaving with the (objects of the) world, it`s a behaving to the (objects of the) world. Recording sound or film is a way of appropriating the world which is primarily a wealthy social process and thereby ethical relevant.
Sound-recordings don't have any excess to the nature of sounds. The Pig in Herbert's tracks is, as the same to music, a construction, an instrumentalisation of sounds for any order of or in the music. There is no primary scene of the lost origin which could be aspired by sound-recordings, even when a lot of soundworks want to do it in that way. These works make a difference between nature and human construction which is the difference between sound and music. But there is no sound for itself, that`s a documentary illusion. There is only "music", even in hearing recorded sounds of nature. A difference exists in how the sound-artists handle those recordings: Herbert gets the focus on the reality of the pig through the narration of the pigs life. So narration, also a construction, is the point where recordings of sound (and film) can get the connection back to the (imaginary) world which was recorded. This organization of time, relevant actions and motives etc. can finally evoke ethical discussions.
Let´s get a more detailed focus on some points:
1. Sound-recordings have the possibility to represent a spatiotemporal reality, but they always integrate the possibility of manipulation as well.
2. Music – in differentiation to noise or sound - begins with a discrete order i.e. with the search for order in sounds (like trying a guitar).
3. The order is in between the sounds, f.e. in the dimension of tonality, mathematics, colours or musical actions. But at first every *sound is experienced with a supposed action by someone*. Here is the point where the use of sound-recordings gets involved in ethics.
4. But not only working with sound-recordings benefits of this small theory of ethical involvements in sound-recordings. Also electronic sounds and pop-music are primarily loudspeaker-music with special performances, so for them too there could be some new perspectives for the way they are perceived.

Representation & Manipulation

The simultaneity of representation and manipulation i.e. the illusion of representation in sound-recordings evokes a mode of perception that always integrates the situation of the recording, the actions by the sound-artist. In contrast to film the manipulation of sounds i.e. the cutting and overlapping of sound-recordings are not as obvious as switching from one picture to another. So for hearing the manipulation, the cut has to be obvious for the listener. The filtered snuffling in the beginning of track *august 2009* is one example. After noticing the possibility of manipulation, all later tracks get ambiguous in their spatiotemporal reality, is it a neutral documentation or does the artist behave more complex and even immoral in the piggery and afterwards in the studio?
We could say that unlike classical instrumental music sound-recordings have a higher chance to be perceived reflexively. Instrumental music also has its possibilities to be perceived with its actions behind the sounds, f.e. virtuosity is one way to focus on action, but only through the scheme of identity of the performer with his instrument. In working with sound-recordings the ear of the artist and of the recorder are already identic, you hear what the artist has heard. So the difference lies in the connection to the recordable world. Sound-recordings suggest that things are going on in this world – including all the electronic computer-sounds (s. Electronic

Music & Pop Music) – and not only the behavior of musicians with their instruments, colleagues and themselves.

Musical order

We hear the soundscape of the piggery in *august 2009* as a situation where Herbert is in presence with the mother-sow. The sounds arise from the movements of the pig, the technical borders of sound-recorders etc. Herbert is noticing the events in a neutral, calm way with his microphone in the hand or stand. The surprising snuffling with the echo-effect is a sound from a totally different point of view. Here, a technical procedure is placed between the sound and the artist. It´s obvious, he is making music. The diegetic soundscape of the piggery is wided up into the brighter sense of making music. Furthermore Herbert wants to tell us the life of a pig. So here we find the productive conflict between the functionalisation of sounds in and for music and the construction of the musical narrative of a pigs life. Shall I use the sound-recordings for making techno, a special pop-musical scheme (hitting the door as the bassdrum), or shall I let the recordings speak about the pig's life themselves?
So there are two points that are interesting: At first Music begins with the appearance of order. Normally this would be the recognition of rhythms or harmonics. The more extreme position would be to say that only the focus of the listeners evokes something appearing as music; in this case the order of music, f.e. in a complex soundscape of nature, would grow up in the in- and exclusive act of listening. The smallest concept of music – the same as of art in general - would be that someone (and as a last resort I) produced an object of experience.
What happens when Herbert is looping the sounds of the pig? He cuts the spatiotemporal reality of the pig in pieces – for his use; in the same way pigs are treated in society – for the use of the society. So the pig is functionalized for the survival of society and the music.
Mostly in music such artistic and social analogies are not such obvious.
Every piece of music uses the energy of its musicians and instruments to fulfill the goal: To perform a piece of music. Functionalisation is a process of neglecting the "imaginary" origins of the functionalised object. Instruments are functionalised for music, but that's their job most people would say. Musicians practice half of their life to reach a level of identity with the instrument where the functionalisation keeps on a low profile. In case of the pig it is different. Here the chance of taking a professional distance to the pig is less. The sound-artist cannot be identified with the sounds of the pig as with a viola. It's not the job of a pig to be played like an instrument. It's not normal that the audience goes to a club for "an awkward dance with the other" [3], where whole tracks are played only with the sounds of a pig and its torso.
But this reality of making music, the utilization and functionalisation of sounds– and it is important to figure this out - happens all the time in music – see the origins of the word "instrument"-, but mostly without ethical dimensions which only come into play with the insuperable distance to the world in sound-recordings which at the same time evokes a rich spectrum of possible attitudes while recording. The easiest and refusable way would be to try to conquer the distance in letting the sound-recorder vanish.

Sound as the result of a supposed action by someone

One Pig is only possible thanks to the existence of sound-recorders and loudspeakers. So not only the way it is recorded is interesting, but also the way it is performed. Hearing sounds from loudspeakers is structurally different from hearing sounds in the world with the connection to their origin – like playing an instrument. Loudspeakers hide the origin of sounds and accentuate the relation between sounds. The fixing of sounds –as the same in film

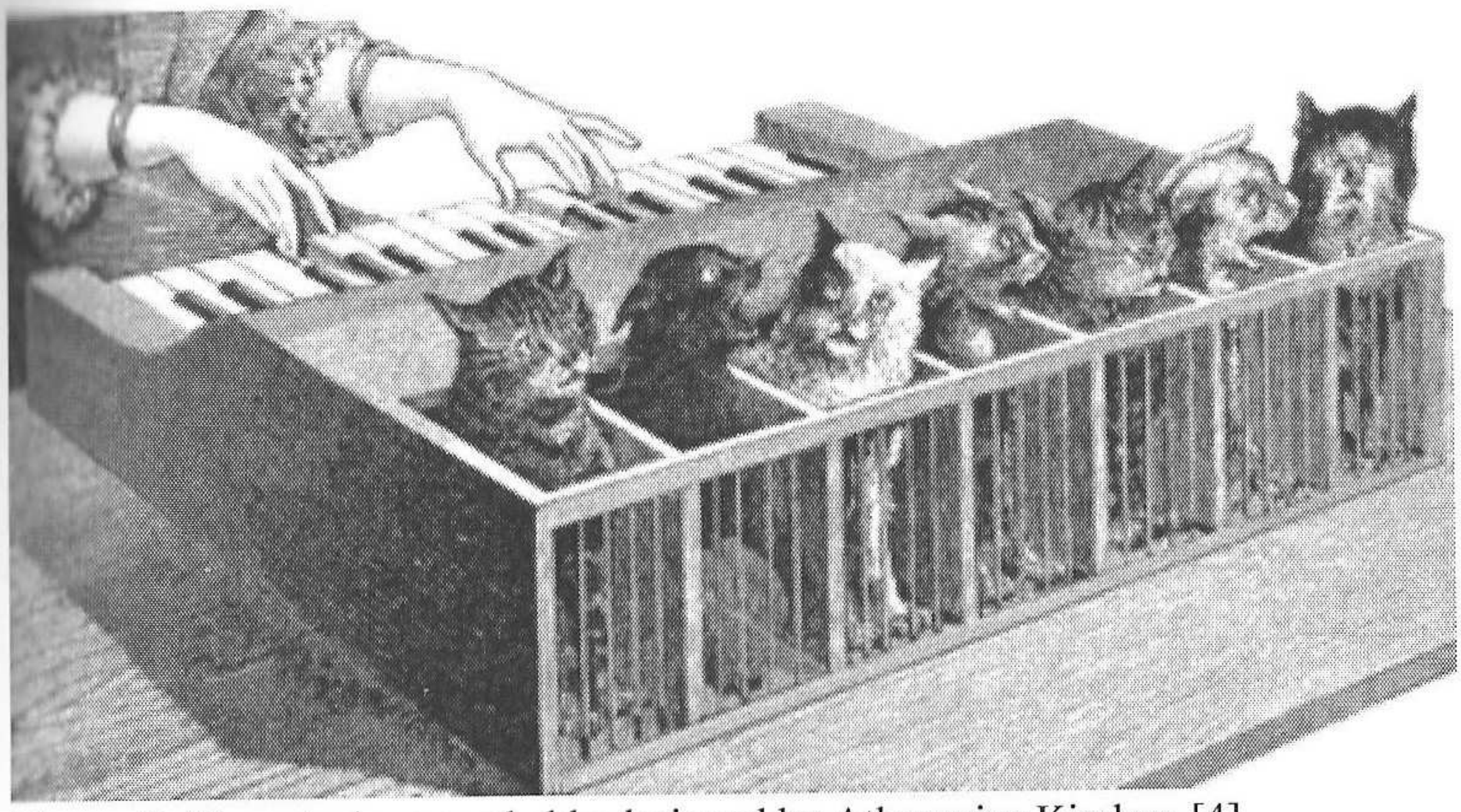
– produces stable, repeatable phenomena. But in perceiving fixed sound material the possible causes of sounds are opened to a wide range of situation, feelings and projections of the listeners. In an imaginary way *sound is perceived as a result of a supposed object being moved by someone with a supposed intention*. And here is the part where the ethics of acoustic ecologies especially of sound-recordings start.
Sound-recordings have the advantage that you can handle them as your ear. But the recorded world cannot be conquered. All actions, handlings, behavior with the recorder are perceiveable. Playing an instrument includes merely safe, moral spotless actions (f.e. burning the guitar down like Jimi Hendrix could evoke ethical steeped discussions), playing a pig as an instrument has its ambivalent connotations of the ambivalent exposure with it in society. Not doing music, as most of the sound-artists would say, is in the context of "sound as a result of a supposed action by someone" also a way of making music. The difference is the spectrum of actions that lead to the sounding objects.
In sound-recordings the spectrum is wided up into every kind of social behavior or action in every thinkable political, aesthetic or spontaneous notion. It doesn´t have to be a personality of a musician with its way of life I like or hate. The artistic position can be more diffused. One pre-condition is the fact of the recorder who captures everything in its physical, neutral way. The recorder has no intelligence which could be interpretable like a human action. So the sound-artist gets in focus in what he is doing with his "instrument". But the recorder is not an instrument anymore which would give its user a border of possible actions. The recorder is an open medium in between; between the object and the subject. So as a sound-artist you don´t play the recorder like a guitar, you are playing with moved i.e. sounding objects in the world. So you have to think twice if you do music with your recorded sounds or just let them in their representation of a spatiotemporal reality.

Pop Music & Electronic Music

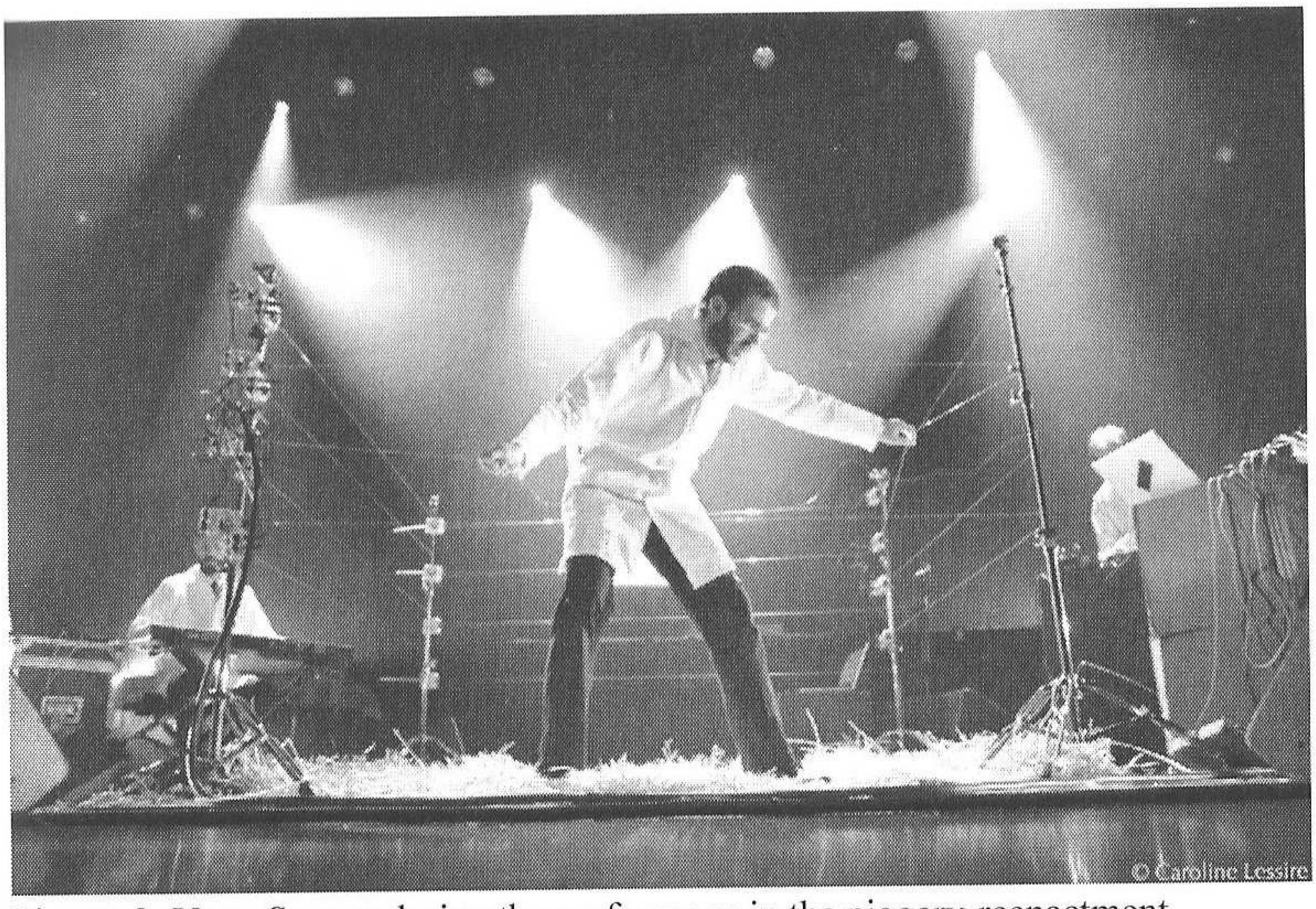
Works with sound-recordings are perceived in a similar way as pop-music where the actions of the musicians are again always perceived within the sounds (not as a reference, but in the way the sounds are produced).
The last examples explained instrumental music as a try to reach an identity with the instrument, so that the functionalisation of the instrument and it´s sounds are identified with the behavior of the instrumentalist. In pop-music the importance of the musician's personality has reached a level where all actions, handlings, are experienced as a way of living your life (in a mediated world). One unspectacular example: Hearing Emerson, Lake & Palmer on loudspeakers evokes a certain handling of the instruments by the musicians. Here nothing attracts attention beside the favor for destroying instruments, because we know the lifestyle and acting of a rockband. In pop-music it is largely the play with these identities in making music, acting famous, being alone etc. which makes the sounds complex in a lebensweltlichen context.

...AND ITS ETHICAL DIMENSIONS

Instrumental music debates the personality who produces sounds with its instrument.
Electroacoustic-Music debates the ethical handling of the world which is recorded in the way it is recorded.
But these differences don`t take place in every single piece of music. Normally nothing is ethical spectacular while hearing to music - just like this:



Picture 2: The cat-piano, probably designed by Athanasius Kircher. [4]



Picture 3: Yann Seznec during the perfomance in the piggery-reenactment. *One Pig live* on November, 25th, 2011 in Bruxelles. [5]

For our clear and satisfied conscience we have well-trained musicians and in the case of the cat-piano well-trained "instruments".

I did not want to mark that we should stop doing music, because every kind of music functionalizes sounds for its use. But at first we should know this fact. It´s a fact that humans build instruments. A violin and a hammer have its clear use. A sound-recorder, as the same with a camera, not. So the recorder is not our instrument, it is our medium. It is the world, the sound of the moved objects that is our instrument. So in recording, as in a filmset, we instrumentalise our surrounding and that should in a way be reflected in the music we

produce. One Pig – this should be clear now – is one really good example for figuring out the ambivalence of producing music in the area of conflict between telling the life of a pig with its sounds and functionalise these sounds for the musical "narration" in elaborating (and for society we have to say living) this ambivalence.
Every soundwork which reduces the perspective to a friendly, kind handling of nature, animals and humans in acting this way while recording, composing and performing, makes it too easy and even more projective. Acting artistically through the medium of sound-recording should also be a script for acting personally in dispute with the world – but only with the hidden knowledge of the omnipresent functionalisation of these sounds for any kind of music.

Example 3: *august 2010* and *mav 2011,* two ways of treating the sorrow. In *august 2010* it is the real treatment in making a RnB-Track with the sounds of eating the pig (the chorus uses a bloodpipe build of the pig etc.). Here Herbert fulfills his promises. The pig is functionalized in both ways: In using the sounds of the pig and in playing instruments build out of the pig. The pig is totally treated. In *may 2011* follows the mental treatment of the death in going back to the piggery and singing an acoustic song accompanied by a guitar:

«At this time, this time of year,
I take my happiness and disappear.
Tell these lungs to breathe again
when the song is back to my refrain.
A simple life is all we need.
Enough to multiply, magnify,
dignify each day.
And so to rest upon my head
let you occupy my thoughts instead.»

A ballad about the simplicity of life which can`t be true after all those treatments of the pig in *august 2010*.
Ethical questions can arise in every moment of social processes. How should I behave in this or that situation? Playing music is one kind of social interaction which is in general not ethical sensational: One example could be the professional musician, who has its repertoire on well-regulated behavior. Or the over-constructed sphere of pop-stars where a scandal is no scandal because every kind of appearance is advertising. Smashing guitars can be something different. But I would say for instrumental music the possibilities of interacting controversial and meaningful with the instrument are probably spent. Peter Ablinger`s landscape-opera "Das Arboretum Seitelschlag - Ulrichsberg, Oberösterreich", where he planted trees in the landscape in their certain acoustic appearance, could be one way to get the focus on playing an instrument as a ethical reflected social action. This opera is working with the situation of direct listening to nature in the nature and its construction. But working with a sound-recorder as a medium is mostly the way of perceiving and interacting with the world today. Trough our ears and in the mediated way of film- and sound-recorders, we perceive the world in such categories like collection/ appropriation, order/alienating, composing/imaging [6]. These are artistic but at first social actions or processes which should be ethical relevant for doing music with sound-recordings - in interacting in or with the world.

NOTES

[1] A detailed analysis and interpretation is published in the magazine *dissonance* (ch). Bastian Zimmermann: "*An awkward dance with the other. Matthew Herbert`s Album One Pig zwischen Sound-Art und Popkultur*" in *Dissonance 117*, March 2012, pp. 29 – 33.
[2] http://www.matthewherbert.com/news/category/one-pig (visited June, the 11th, 2012)
[3] As it is said in the booklet of the album One Pig. (*One Pig,* Accidental Records, AC48CD, UK 2011)
[4] http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Datei:Cat_piano_1883.jpg&filetimestamp=20110626075045 (visited June, the 11th, 2012)
[5] http://www.gonzocircus.com/17989/recensie-matthew-herbert-autumn-falls-festival (visited 11.06.2012, photo: Caroline Lessire)
[6] s. citation 1.