

Rolf Julius left this world behind on Friday January 21st, in the morning, at his home in Berlin where he had been living for decades, just a couple of days before his 72nd birthday (he was born in Wilhelmshafen, in the North of Germany, on 25th January 1939). Even though he wasn't exactly famous, he was a well-known and estimated artist and performer, for the high quality and absolute originality of his work. He devoted himself both to art in the strictest sense of the word and to musical research in an area one may loosely define as post-cagean. He found his path at a relatively mature age, when he was almost in his 40s, during the latter part of the 1970s, with his first photographic works, and went on using that medium exclusively till 1979. At the very end of that decade – which had been extremely fertile in many areas of artistic research, especially as far as performative art and experimentation with sound were concerned – he decided to bring the element of sound to the forefront of his work, creating original compositions (after having occasionally used other artists' work, especially by the group of American musicians Sonic Arts Union). This was in 1979, shortly before the great exhibition “Für Augen und Ohren”, held in Berlin at the Akademie der Künste, in 1980. It was the first exhibition ever to try – way ahead of its time – to make an assessment of the presence of sound (rather than music, recognizing the well-known cagean tendencies) in visual art. Julius was selected by the curator, Renè Block, along with other mostly little-known artists and presented his first work ever (“Deichlinie”), where image and sound were both present at the same time, working in osmosis in order to create a synaesthetic phenomenon in the onlooker.

Then it was the time of the momentous Berlin Concert Series, held over twelve months between 1981 and 1982, 'musical actions' which took place, without any official notice – at the most spread by word of mouth amongst a limited circle of friends and acquaintances – in public places across the city (at that time still divided into East and West), like a garden, a (frozen) lake, the ruins of a bombed house. Julius set up – still rather rudimentary, given the times – “broadcasting systems” for his open-air *small musics*, 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 sounds of animals and plants and the voices of the people present.

In 1983 he was artist-in-residence for a year at the PS1 in New York, which allowed him to pursue his research further – inside the big studio he was provided with – with more and more creative freedom, putting together, in order to create minimal installations bordering on the invisible, discarded iron or pieces of plaster fallen off the old walls of the building with small 'open' speakers (a procedure first experimented by Takehisha Kosugi, a great performer whom Julius always considered his mentor) or common glass jars half-filled with water with a small open speaker floating on top. In New York Julius also had the opportunity to come into direct contact with the great masters of American sound research, mostly (at least at the time, but partly still to this day) obscure, like David Behrman, Pauline Oliveros, David Tudor, the great vocalist Joan La Barbara, whose sampled voice had already been frequently used in his compositions, and John Cage himself.

In 1987, there was his participation at documenta 8, and after that, there was an indefinable number of both solo and group exhibitions, in museums and private spaces across the world: just to mention a few amongst the most important ones, in Germany (Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin in 1998, Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel in 2001, Museum Bochum in 2006), in France (Biennale de Paris in 1985, FRAC Bourgogne in 1998 and 2001, FRAC Limousin in 2003, FRAC Languedoc-Roussillon in 2004, Centre Pompidou in 2004 too) in the USA (after PS1 in 1983, a couple of exhibitions at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, between 1996 and 2001, at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco in 2001) in Japan (360° Gallery in Tokyo in 2002 and last year, at the National Museum in Kyoto in 2007 and at Echino-Tsumari Art Triennial in 2009).

As to Italy, after an occasional appearance in Milan towards the end of the '80s, he returned in 2001 for a solo exhibition in Turin at e/static (that represented him from then onwards),

followed by another one in 2005, "Penombra", and "Two spaces (walking)" in 2007. The fourth one, which had been in the pipeline for a while, but which will now unfortunately be posthumous, will open on 14th April 2011. Rolf Julius also participated in some important group exhibitions, like "Light sculpture / scultura leggera" in Vicenza in 2005, "Collectors 2", which showcased works from the Alpegiani collection at the Caraglio Spinning Mill in 2008, and the group exhibition "It rests, by changing" (with F.E. Walther, R. Signer and J. Kowanda) at the Raffaella Cortese Gallery in Milan in 2009, and the last one "Linguaggi e sperimentazioni. Opere della collezione AGI di Verona / Languages and experimentations. Works from the AGI Collection in Verona", at the MART in Rovereto in 2010.

Rolf Julius is a truly important artist, even though he's relatively less known than others from his generation. His work was 'research' in the purest and highest meaning of the word, a research which was rigorous and totally averse to compromise for the sake of 'success at all costs', and which was still currently evolving, when he had already been struck by the illness which ended his earthly life. It's the extremely sensitive and 'compassionate' perspective of a profoundly humane author, able to confer dignity and importance (the dignity and importance which only we don't acknowledge due to distraction or superficiality) even to the humblest things, the stones used to build the paving of the roads, rusty pieces of iron, the dirt collected against the corner between the floor and the wall, the cinders from the fire in the hearth of his house in Finland. And furthermore, the singing of the grasshoppers and the birds, the noise made by a small piece of iron rubbed against the surface of a slab of stone, the noise of the wind, the vibration of glass to the sound of a speaker placed against it, and all the sounds he created starting from a simple mechanical noise, transformed – after countless chain recordings with the *reel to reel* technique – into hitherto unheard sounds, strangely fascinating, which he combined, in his unique installations, with plastic mugs, cobblestones, powder pigments, sheets of glass. But he also frequently used technological elements, and his last sound works can be played on various kinds of support, and not necessarily the old tape-recorders of his beginnings or, later, cd-players, but also with state-of-the-art iPods or with mp3 players. And his videos are really beautiful, always shot with a fixed camera, almost always outdoor in Finland (and some also in Japan), a method that Julius adopted around the 2000s, when he had been past his 60s already for a while.

On the 15th March he should have given a performance, as a performer' (with his 'small musics') in the famous, prestigious Rothko Chapel, in front of the great canvases of the American master, whose work Julius certainly admired. He didn't make it, destiny had already decided to put an end to his time before that date.

His work is of great breadth, for the countless works of visual art (his drawings are many too, and of great beauty and intensity) and of musical compositions, only partly published on vinyl and cds (but a 9 cd series, *small music*, is being published by the American label Western Vinyl). Nevertheless, his work has various little-known aspects, still to be discovered (or rediscovered) and the next years should bring his definitive acknowledgement, placing Rolf Julius in his rightful place, amongst the few great masters of the last thirty years.

Carlo Fossati, 23rd January 2011 (translated by Valentina Maffucci)