Carl Michael von Hausswolff

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For over twenty years, Swedish artist Carl Michael von Hausswolff (born 1956 in Linköping) has been giving shape to a range of works which push the boundaries of sound experimentation and reach out into installation art, photography, video, performance and curating projects. Stemming from his experiments with tape and investigations into EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomena) throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and setting up a number of ongoing collaborations with artist Leif Elggren and with a wide range of experimental musicians in the collective, site-specific sound installation *freq_out*, von Hausswolff's work spans the undefined territory between sound and the visual arts – he has done so, also by organising exhibitions such as the 2nd Göteborg Biennial in 2003. His audio production, using devices such as oscillators, tone generators, microphones attached to electricity circuits, is inextricably linked to his visual and conceptual research, always addressing issues of borders, interior/exterior, liminal states and hidden fluxes of energies. At the forefront of international experimentation, his work has been featured in some of the most important exhibitions and museums in the world, and his audio pieces have been published by the most remarkable avant-garde labels.

Envisioning or evoking, capturing or imagining sounds that belong to transient and liminal perceptual states has been for over twenty years at the core of Carl Michael von Hausswolff's work, reaching out to a number of practices that range from sound installation to curating projects, from audio production to setting up magazines and record labels, from photography to video. The *terrain vague* in which the Swedish artist moves is nonetheless made consistent by a strong cohesion which lies at the very heart of his work, that is, the attempt to bring to surface – though just by fleeting hints and clues, by subtraction and subtle allusions – those very uncertainties which lie at the heart of the human condition, those states of transition and suspension which make each experience – be it aesthetic or existential, social or political – meaningful.

Ever since 1980, when in Göteborg, Sweden, von Hausswolff established *Radium 226.05* with German photographer Ulrich Hillebrand as a magazine which soon expanded to a variety of artistic endeavours such as music publishing, photography, poetry, conceptual art, festivals and exhibitions, his work has been irradiating from a central conceptual core, which can infiltrate and slip through a myriad of formats. 'We agreed upon the fact that everything we did should have an underlying aesthetic base and the approach to everything that concerned us – and this didn't exclude anything – should have an artistic finish. In this way we realised that we could practically do everything we wanted to' (Cascella 2003: 18–19). In fact, von Hausswolff's activity is based on the ineffable dimension, on those hidden streams of energies which are untold and whose effects we can't but acknowledge. Sound, in this sense, is one of the artist's privileged means – although not the exclusive one. It is impossible to experience and read his experiments with sound as if it were a medium *per se*: it is by virtue of its multiple contaminations and infiltrations that von Hausswolff's use of the most invisible medium shall be read. Coming into contact with some of the most extreme and obscure entities in experimental sound-making throughout the 1980s and 1990s – through *Radium 226.05* and the following *Anckarström* (1992–1995), through the collaboration with Andrew McKenzie (1991–1996) and the Hafler Trio in 1994, and through close involvement with Swedish new music and intermedia society Fylkingen – von Hausswolff developed and practised a number of operations and actions which could fathom the depths of sound production not intended as a linear, finished entity but rather as an ongoing 'object in motion', (Artforum 2004) capable to graze a number of gradations in perceptual limbo.

> Ruppemi l'alto sonno ne la testa / un greve truono, sì ch'io mi riscossi / come persona ch'è per forza desta; / e l'occhio riposato intorno mossi, / dritto levato, e fiso riguardai / per conoscer lo loco dov'io fossi. / Vero è che 'n su la proda mi trovai / de la valle d'abisso dolorosa / che 'ntrono accoglie d'infiniti guai.

In the opening verses of Canto IV of *Inferno*, in the *Divine Comedy* (Alighieri), on awakening back in Limbo, Dante is first shaken by the sound of a thunder, then he is enwrapped by the presence of endless whispers: not clear or definite laments, but rather a constant humming, which all the same makes the air vibrate. A nearly imperceptible entity, yet subtly pervading to the point of making its presence felt rather

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than just heard, is outlined as the sound of limbo – the space for lingering souls, for in-between states, for those who, in older tradition, suffered from a desire for God never to be fulfilled, and which in our times translates to a condition of uncertainty and loss. The in-between, phantasmic dimension of sound – as Allen S. Weiss would have it (Weiss 1995) – was taken up by von Hausswolff in his early experiments with tape and throughout his *Parasitic Electronic Séance* projects: a series of installations aiming at locating in-between voices in the electricity systems, using induction microphones to pick up the sound from electricity sockets in various places (Santa Fe, Paris, Stockholm, Ljubljana) and reproducing those sounds in the exhibition space alongside an oscillogram projected on the wall (Figure 1).

Sounds related to such experiments were published on the LP *Operations Of Spirit Communication* (2000). Two years later von Hausswolff tried to set up communication with Lucifer in *Establishing Communication with the Fallen Angel* (2002), an installation that employed a midwave radio receiver, a step-down pitch (to make the sound lower) and a PA system, shown in New York and Mexico City. Interest in trying to catch the voices from the other side – again, as Dante said, 'discussing things which are better kept unspoken' (Alighieri) – is mostly summed up in von Hausswolff's

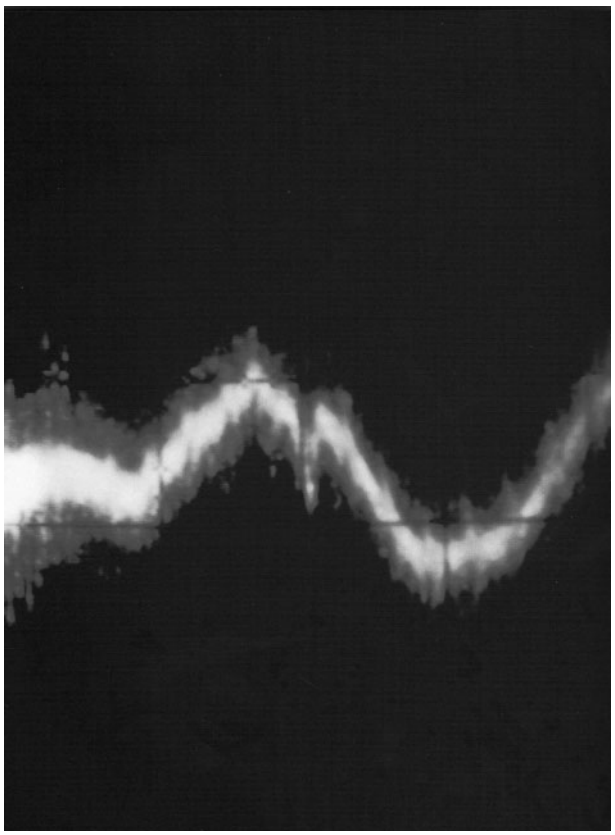


Figure 1. Carl Michael von Hausswolff, *Parasitic Electronic Séance. Oscillogram #2*, 1998, installation view.

experiments with EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomena): those unexplained voices found on magnetic tapes and radio frequencies, to whom a whole trail of research has been devoted throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Von Hausswolff paid homage to one of the pioneers of EVP investigation, Friedrich Jürgenson, in an exhibition that he set up in 2000 at Färgfabriken, Stockholm. There, he showed Jürgenson's tape archive and made samples available for listening, alongside documentation of his archaeological activity and documentaries.

> It's always interesting to bring forth items that you have not seen or heard before. This is one the artist's tasks. These unknown elements might harm you or take care of you, but when invoking them you have to take good care. The technique of putting these items into an art context lets them inside in a smooth way ... but maybe they're not there in the long run to be pieces of art, maybe they will be of another use in the future. (Cascella 2003: 23)

No longer does the artist 'help the world by revealing mystic truths', as Bruce Nauman stated back in 1967 in one of his early neon pieces: no longer is the artist a centre, embodying a specially defined type of activity. The artist, in fact, needs help as much as anyone else. The notion of artist is pulverised, according to Hausswolff, throughout a number of practices that are not concerned with any fixed 'truths', but rather with uncertainty and a perpetual state of flow, and do not aim at 'revealing' but rather at hinting, suggesting, evoking in a state of tension rather than release, of potentiality rather than actuality. Halfway through provocation and devotion, and by means of operations on the very border of credibility, deluding any expectations for clarity, von Hausswolff's work reaches out to what's limitless. What is striking in all of his multifaceted oeuvre are the subtle conceptual twists, whose foundations you can at the same time grasp on a very sensual, ultimately emotional level. This perhaps has to do with changing, swapping and twisting pre-set points of view, and playing with the modes and forms of conceptual art so as to renew them and update them to a highly unstable condition. It is this playing between extremes, this state of perpetual instability between fixed grids and impalpable matter, between conceptual rigour and extreme playfulness, that make his art stand out. After all, it was the very master of conceptual theory, Sol LeWitt, who envisaged a breakaway from the grid when he stated: 'The logic of a piece or series of pieces is a device that is used at times only to be ruined' (LeWitt 1967) or hinted at the possibility of transcending logic and grasp something beyond that, when he wrote: 'Other plans imply infinity' (*ibid.*).

Infinity implied, or energies grasped such as the electricity fluxes, upon which von Hausswolff feeds his installations and interventions, do not call so much for the display of technical characteristics as to giving in to

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their effects and powers: it's not so much about rules, but rather about the hidden but pervasive, vibrant quality of sound. As Russian poet Daniil Kharms wrote: 'It is not the number which explains what sound and tone are: it is sound and tone which shed even a little drop of light within the innermost essence of the number' (Kharms 2006). It is interesting to note how, in the very moment in the history of science when an impressive number of discoveries were being made in relation to electricity – the late eighteenth century – at the height of Rationalistic fever, a scientist such as Pierre-Simon de Laplace stated: 'We are so far from knowing all the agents of nature and their different ways of action, that it wouldn't be apt to philosophy to deny a number of phenomena just because, as far as today's knowledge goes, they are unexplained' (Laplace 1995). Von Hausswolff's recorded audio work lies at the very heart of such unexplained dimension, and it mostly consists of fluctuations of drones, produced by a variety of sources and devices such as tone generators, oscillators, radars, radio waves, telephone bugging microphones, microphones attached to electric circuits. *Ström* (2001), for example, is a fifty-minute perceptual tour de force, which captures electricity fluxes and arranges them in a vortex. *A Lecture on Disturbances in Architecture* (2002) [cf. audio CD] operates on various levels of perceptual compression: from the ethereal to the claustrophobic, from the airy to the obsessive. Ultimately, von Hausswolff's recordings are to be experienced and understood as emanations that seep through, enrich, twist or erode the pre-existing audioscape. His records are not fixed, separated entities: as they suggest a perpetual streaming, they infiltrate, subvert and subtly shake aural and – more generally – perceptual conditions and are conversely deformed by them. 'My only desire was to find new systems for realising music as a constant flow of aesthetic beauty and conceptual content, never excluding the possibilities of unknown forms of life to interfere and intrude in these systems' (Birnbaum 2002). Intrusion is explored under various guises by von Hausswolff in his large catalogue of records, published by some of the most remarkable experimental labels. For instance, intrusion can be intended as parasitical: in *Leech* (2006) he sucks energy from the work of three artists (Carsten Höller, Olafur Eliasson, Grönlund/Nisunen) and a DJ (Richard James) bringing forth his personal idea of interpretation. A sort of spiritual brotherhood ties von Hausswolff to each artist involved: interest in hidden energy flows in Grönlund/Nisunen, playfulness mixed to conceptual rigour in Höller, dynamics of natural phenomena in Eliasson. By stealing sound from the electrical devices within each artist's work, he seems to unite them in a field of frequencies, hums and unbearable bass, to reveal the hidden voices and ominous presences dwelling on the margins of apparatuses. And he does so, by reaching extreme levels of obsession and saturation of the listening space – in seemingly hermetic ways, yet full of nuances. In *Our Telluric Conversation* (2006) – a sophisticated lesson in sound arrangement with John Duncan – intrusion takes the shape of narration halfway through oneiric and surgical sounds: the voice appears nearly motionless, fixed in light tonal vibrations of a disarming presence punctuated by the hypnotic pulsation of a sonar interspersed with noise disturbances. In *Three Overpopulated Cities Built by Shortsighted Planners, an Unbalanced and Quite Dangerous Airport and an Abandoned Church* (2004) [cf. audio CD] intrusion is intended as a sculptural presence, rendered through subtle transparent interplay and sudden contrast. Hausswolff investigates hidden mechanisms ruling the flux of people, forces and energies in metropolises such as Mexico City, Tokyo and Bangkok and puts them in relation to abandoned or unknown places in the world. Halfway through illusion and delusion, total immersion and ironic detachment, these sounds have the solidity of an obsession and the impalpability of a shadow – hypnotic drones slit by high frequencies, bass hums and rhythmic beats, a hammering that seals the brain in a box, the uniform oscillation disturbed by clusters of deafening sounds, pulsations which force the limits of bass. In *There Are No Crows Flying Around The Hancock Building* (2005) [cf. audio CD], intrusion is a means to question mechanisms of surveillance, visibility and omission. A stubborn, constant rhythm doubles up in a screechy background, introducing textures of field recordings made by von Hausswolff on top of the hundred-storey Hancock Building in Chicago. Rotations of feedback are imposed on the rest of sonic events as heavy and opaque layers. The listening tunnels that von Hausswolff forces us into never give in to ornament or distraction; they explore the meanders of a claustrophobic nightmare.

It was Max Neuhaus who pointed out that sound in itself does not constitute a work of art: it is instead the material with which a work is built, the actual work being the inextricable, resulting mixture of sound and place all around with all its specific features (Loock and Neuhaus 1990). One of the most remarkable characteristics in the seminal *Place Works* by the Texan artist is invisibility – he infiltrates what he calls 'almost plausible' sounds into the pre-existing soundscape, subtly creating 'a different kind of air' (Gianelli and Russo 1995: 17) . Von Hausswolff often deals with invisibility, too. Rather than *creating* other densities, though, he goes about *hunting* for them. He does so by shifting the focus on dissolving points, on unexpected visual leakage, breakaway points, mental asymptotes. Transition from anonymous spaces to charged, haunted places, is evoked and explored in a variety of projects. To coincide with the release of the *There Are No Crows Flying Around The Hancock Building* CD, and stemming from the same perceptual milieu, the *Red Empty*

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catalogue was published (von Hausswolff 2005) – a further clue to von Hausswolff's belief that the same core thought can take on a variety of shapes and formats. As he stated:

> On quite a few occasions I have shaped various works according to what media they have faced. A sound installation outdoors in central Stockholm was, of course, formatted for this place; but the CD that was released some time after had a different shape. I think formatting will be an issue in the future. Artists know that any concept can be modulated for the occasion. The artist can be invited to a poetry festival, a biennial for visual arts, an electronic music festival, etc., and the same concept can be used. The artist only needs to adopt the limitations of the specific discipline. This goes along with the general contemporary ideas of infiltration – the method used nowadays instead of the failure of direct confrontation. (Artforum 2004)

On such grounds, one can look at the *Red Empty* pictures and recall the persistent buzz in the Hancock audio piece – or listen to the recorded tracks not as a linear, consequential development but as an ongoing mood, a sound object, enwrapping the listeners' minds and possessing their bodies. *Red Empty* is part of a photographic series and installation project that began in 1999 (other sections were entitled *Red Pool*, 1999, *Red Night*, 1999, *Red Code*, 2001, *Red Empty*, 2003, *Red Mersey*, 2004) (Figure 2) in which von Hausswolff sets red spotlights against abandoned or empty buildings and takes pictures of the resulting encounter between something which is transient in its contingency yet charged with history (the building), and something which is elusive in its very body yet charged with symbolic meaning (the red light). In this way, he creates a perceptual *chiaroscuro* whose palette plays with notions of boundary and accessibility, and envisions an escape. The use of the colour red here is by no means intended as an overall, even layer that masks or covers, but rather as a study of the vibrating properties of surfaces and the unveiling potential of persistent memory flickers. 'Red is, for me, very connected to low frequency sound, and also a very classic and controversial colour' (e-mail interview with author, July 2007).

Gordon Matta-Clark referred to one of his most conceptual projects, *Anarchitecture* (1974), as looking at 'metaphoric voids, gaps, leftover spaces' (Russi Kirshner 2003). The 'fake estates' that he collected as part of that project were not interesting in their possible use but rather hinted at 'collapse, failure, absence and memory' (*ibid.*), at the same time addressing issues of accessibility with regards to social structures. The spaces which von Hausswolff goes about catching through the camera lens and the red light are not as much fake estates or structural gaps, as real enigmas, empty buildings haunted by ghostly presences: these are implied by pointing the red light at surfaces which are not limits, but porous entities – red functions as a patina which lies on the surface and brings within itself detritus from the past and from history.



Figure 2. Carl Michael von Hausswolff, *Red Empty (Chicago 2003). Church*. 2003, photographic print.

A fascination with apparently empty spaces also informs the video *Hashima* (2002) (Figure 3), in which von Hausswolff and Swedish director Thomas Nordanstad present a sequence of images shot in the abandoned Hashima island in Japan – that once hosted a coal mining factory and that was entirely abandoned in the 1970s following the decay of the coal production and consequent lack of reason for people to live there – leaving an imposing, spectral environment all around. As in *Hashima*, often von Hausswolff outlines perceptual states *in absentia*. He has done so in a number of projects, such as his installation featuring volatile substances *Thinner & Low Frequency Bar* (1998–2005) (Figure 4): a bar made of a steel frame and glass benches on which a series of cans containing thinner are placed alongside an oscillator that produces low frequencies, capable of altering the experience of the space. In his piece at Manifesta 1 in Rotterdam (1996) he presented a large open cage with thirty birds, some of them flying around, others deciding to stay – dealing with notions of territorial shift and/or confusion, migration, inclusion/exclusion. Perhaps the most relevant work in this sense

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Figure 3. Thomas Nordanstand and C. M. von Hausswolff, Hashima, Japan, 2002, still from video.

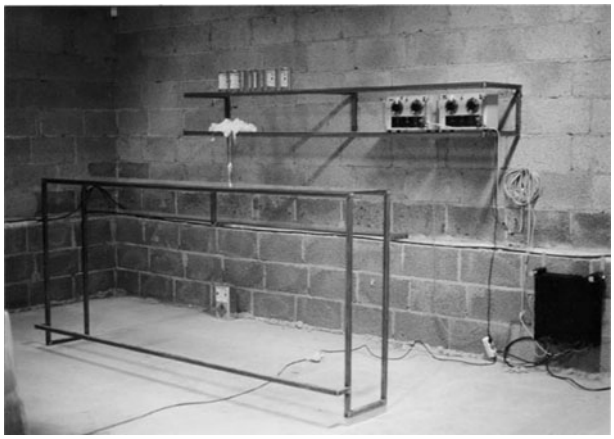


Figure 4. Carl Michael von Hausswolff, *Thinner and Low Frequency Bar*.

is *The Kingdom of Elgaland-Vargaland*, the collaborative project initiated in 1992 by von Hausswolff and by long-standing partner Leif Elggren (Figures 5–7). The Kingdom annexes territories and states of transition and flux, pointing at the potential within a number of border operations, and considering that each one of them may eventually dissolve and open up to imaginary spaces. As Elggren and von Hausswolff wrote in the Constitution:

> Mental and perceptive territories such as the Hypnagogue State (civil), the Escapistic Territory (civil) and the Virtual Room (digital). The civil territories function as psychic and are self-contained. They appear in every citizen's mind, by will or by chance. The Hypnagogue State is the border area between waking and sleeping. A dreamspace where the citizen's consciousness is still in operation and where the physical sensation of limitlessness occurs. Here, the citizen can potentially stay in



Figure 5. *Elgaland-Vargaland*. Official Inauguration of the Embassy in Los Angeles, Robert Berman Gallery, 1999.

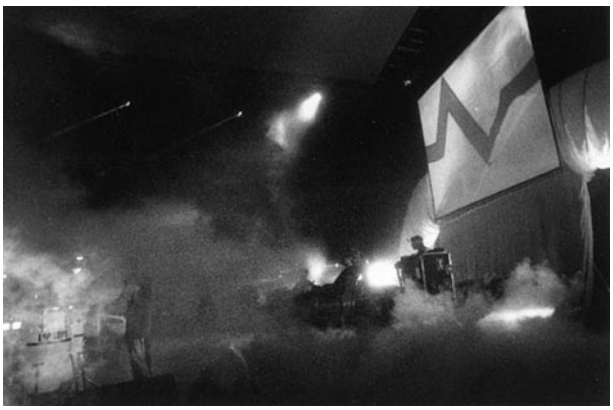


Figure 6. *Elgaland-Vargaland* performance, 1995.

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Figure 7. *Elgaland-Vargaland* installation shots, 1995.

> KREV; "I understand this place as KREV", the citizen declares and proceeds into the area. The Escapistic Territory functions in the same way as the Hypnagogue State, but with the difference that here the citizen is awake. It's an area to dwell in when wanting to 'go somewhere else'. It's a personal projection, very much alike daydreaming, where your mind is occupied by a fantasy or an interesting thought; alone with your brain, with a mind sucking novel or a film, in a poem or a musical piece. The Escapistic Territory holds many possibilities and also coincides with the shamanistic techniques of mental space travel. Other mental and civil territories could also be annexed such as the borderline zones of mental diseases, near death experiences, hypnosis and mesmerism, telekinetics, telepathy, suggestions, strokes, delirium, various influences of drugs (such as peyote, LSD, ecstasy, cannabis, thinner, ether, alcohol etc), speaking in tongues, religious ecstasy, artistic inspiration and expiration, possession by spirit, good or evil, dusk and dawn, terror, love, orgasm, interference, the state of contradiction or hesitation. Other potentially closely-related territories could be hard disc crashes, computer viruses, frequencies, fission or the fusion of particles. The Digital Room is, as the name proposes, a digitally programmed territory. (Elggren and von Hausswolff 1992)

Venice, June 2007. Isola di San Michele, the little island in the archipelago which hosts the city cemetery. To the onlooker, nothing remotely related to a work of art or performance is there – no evident intrusion, no tangible presence, no action either. By disseminating a number of hints in the days before the Biennale – spread via email to the Kingdom's mailing list – of the forthcoming annexation of the Island's territory, Hausswolff and Elggren actually put an ideal frame around the specific space of the Island intended as a mental and poetic one, in which each individual can dwell and can let their private personal thoughts wander. It is our singular task to find our ways and approach that island – ideally, if not actually: to anticipate it, reach it sooner or later, or recall it.

On the occasion of the Isola di San Michele annexation, Elggren and von Hausswolff produced a set of stamps featuring photographs from the cemetery, and various *Elgaland-Vargaland*-related symbols (Figure 8): among the most pervasive technical means allowing 'communication', presented here both as emblems of their function and as aesthetic objects, the stamps also refer to the rich network of symbols and meanings that a specific setting can trigger in each one and each time in a different manner. After all, in one of the early Kingdom-related actions, the inauguration of The General Consulate in New York City, in March 1994 at Thomas Nordanstad Gallery, 'two large world maps were re-arranged visually in order to re-order the political and social status of the world. One map was used for the termination of all borders down to the elimination of all names and the other for the enhancement of borders up to each single individual' (Elggren and von Hausswolff 1992) – a hint at digging out potentials within individual creativity on one side, and responsibility on the other.

The potential within collaboration, expanding and irradiating as projects, and within strong individual influences also informs a good portion of Hausswolff's curatorial practice – the latter was explored through a series of dedicated projects that he curated at

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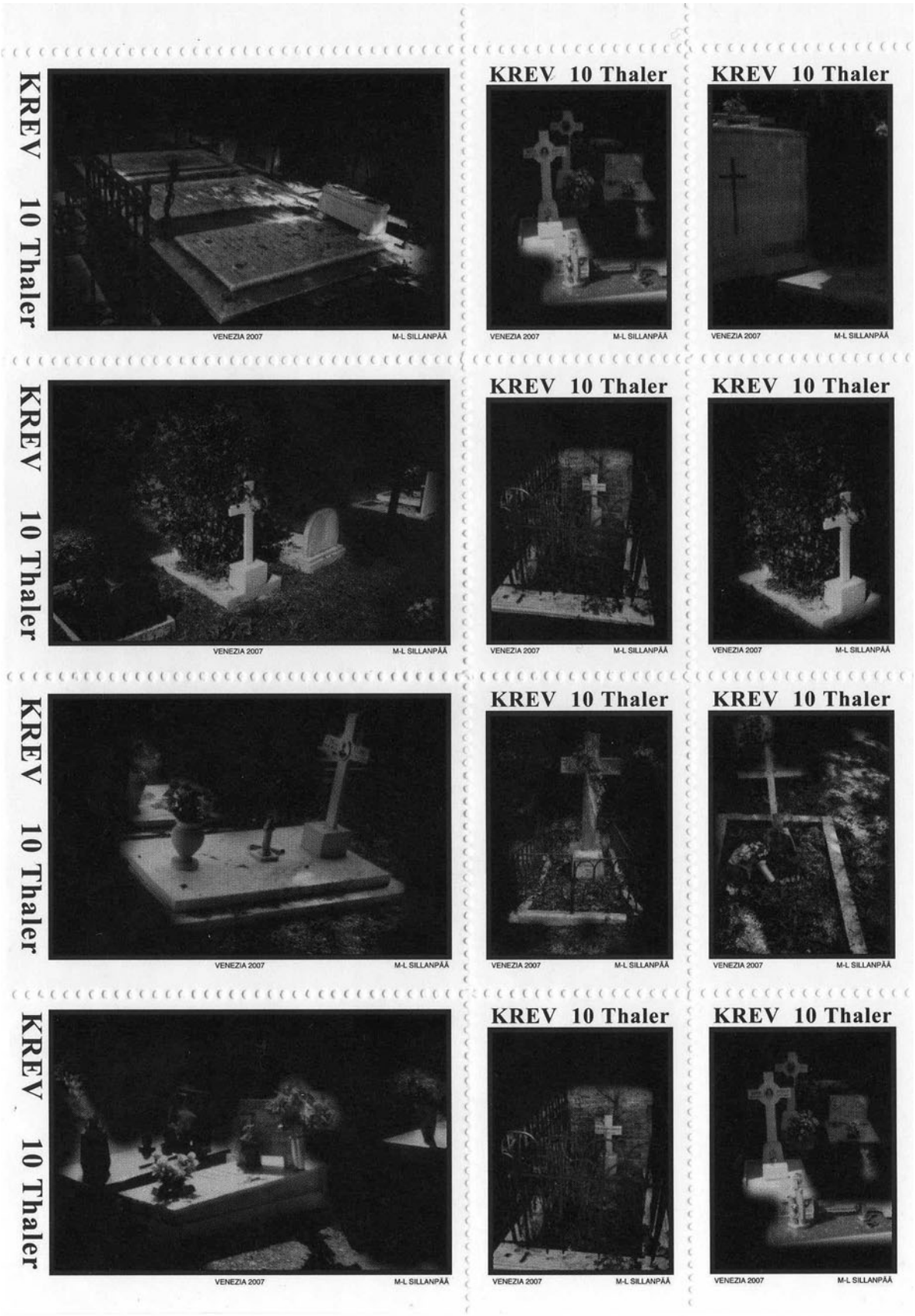


Figure 8. *Elgaland-Vargaland* stamps, Venice Biennale 2007.

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Färgfabriken in Stockholm starting in 2000, featuring the above-mentioned Jürgenson and Elggren, electronic music pioneer Rune Lindblad (2001), and poet and artist Brion Gysin (2003). 'In the beginning of the 1980's I met Gysin in Basel, London and Paris, and William Burroughs in London and Göteborg. They have been like mentors for me. *Radium 226.05* was initially a magazine and we were connected to Burroughs, Gysin and the whole gang. We produced two issues with material by them' (e-mail interview with author, June 2007). The boundaries between influence, creation and collaboration merge, giving way to a thick network of allusions, references and cross-inspirational practices which lie at the ground of von Hausswolff's activities. As he wrote in the catalogue of the 2nd Göteborg Biennale, *Against All Evens*, that he curated in 2003, 'an artist is a person who is trying to produce a model or a vision based on his or her experience. This vision, be it of sound or image, most often contains a large amount of doubt and principles of uncertainty' (von Hausswolff 2003). And he goes on, 'Perhaps it is this doubt, this uncertainty, that characterises new art' (*ibid.*). A further reflection on both individual potential, ever-moving perceptual territories and states of doubt as to fixed positions all inform von Hausswolff's recent curatorial project *freq_out*, one of the most attentive ways of reflecting today on issues related to 'sound art' shows and the possibility of a variety of sound signals co-existing in the same space. The project began in June 2003 within the *Disturbances* festival in Copenhagen and was subsequently hosted by a number of other international festivals and locations, such as *Ultima* in Oslo (2004) or *Sonambiente* in Berlin (2006); it is a site-specific, collaborative sound installation formed by twelve sound pieces developed independently and then merging together within the space. Hausswolff divides the spectrum of frequencies between 0 and 12.000 Hz in twelve portions, and assigns each of them in turn to a musician, who has to operate within those frequency limits. Among those involved are Jim 'Foetus' Thirlwell, Brandon LaBelle, Jacob Kirkegaard, Mike Harding, Grönlund/Nisunen, Pomassl: not always 'just' musicians but also architects, composers, artists. The resulting piece is a fluctuating array of textures which initially enwrap the listener as a whole, then open up to a variety of detailed perceptual states from deep bass waves to piercing frequencies. Addressing notions of site-specificity, collaboration and co-existence of a variety of sonic impulses within more or less conventional exhibition spaces, *freq_out* proves to be yet another instalment in von Hausswolff's ongoing forays into insidious sonic realms.

> There is basically no difference if you work with sound, vision, labels etc – it's only you! That's why sometimes I get a bit bored with art that so blatantly tells you something about the artist. It's there anyway – in the flow of things, in the distillation. That's where the ethers and the fluids and the essences cooperate. That's when the questions really start to hit you ... (Cascella 2003)

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