

## CUSP to host Jaap Blonk

by Mike Telin



The self-taught Dutch composer, vocalist, poet, and visual artist Jaap Blonk will present a unique program on the Cleveland Uncommon Sound Project series at Convivium 33 Gallery on Friday, October 20 at 8pm.

I reached the sound poet by Skype at his home in Arnhem, Netherlands and began by asking him what the audience can expect to hear on Friday.

*Jaap Blonk:* I'll do two sets. The first will be me interpreting some poetry from the history of Dada. And the second will be my own work for voice with some electronics.

*Mike Telin:* How did you get into sound poetry?

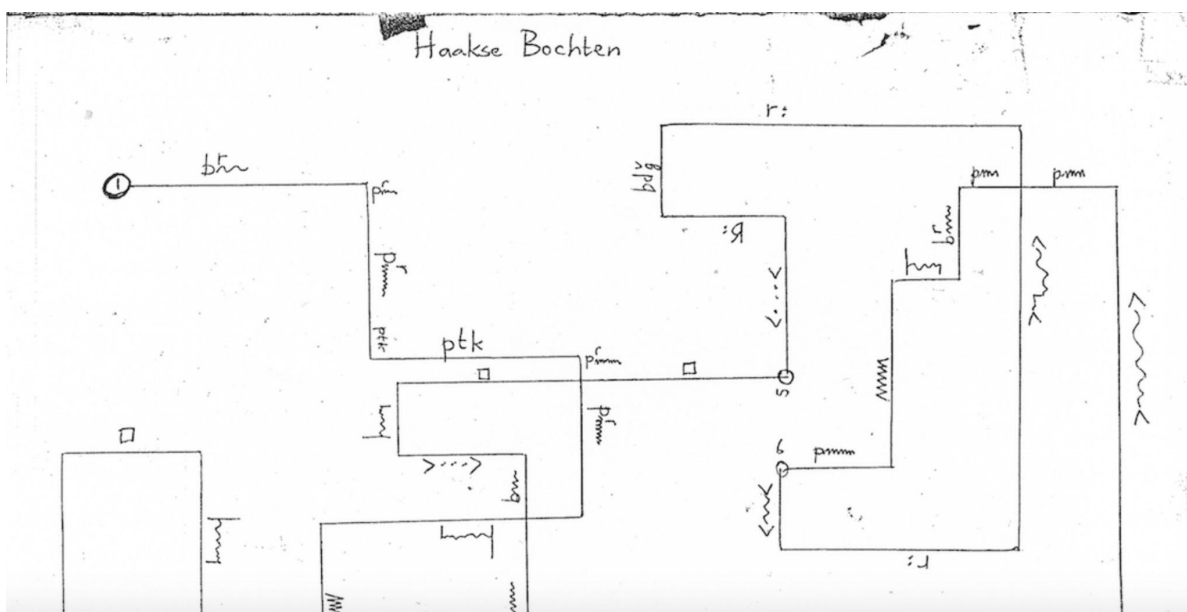
JB: Well, it was a long time ago. I was actually studying mathematics and physics at the University in Utrecht here in Holland, but I got fed up with it so I quit. At the time I was playing saxophone and became interested in poetry, jazz, and free jazz. At some point I took part in a workshop about reciting poetry — classical poetry, but also experimental stuff.

One thing that especially gripped me were the six sound poems that Hugo Ball presented at the Dada Soirée in Utrecht in 1916. I memorized one of them and presented it at the closing of the workshop. That was really an eye or ear opener for me, discovering a no man's land between music on the one hand and literature or poetry on the other.

I intuitively felt that this was a field with a lot of possibilities. You could make any piece you wanted to — there were no rules like in music or literature where you have to use intelligible words and semantic phrases — and that was attractive to me.

So I started looking for more sound poems and I found Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate* (Primordial Sonata), which I also memorized. It took me a few years, but my first vocal performances were with that piece.

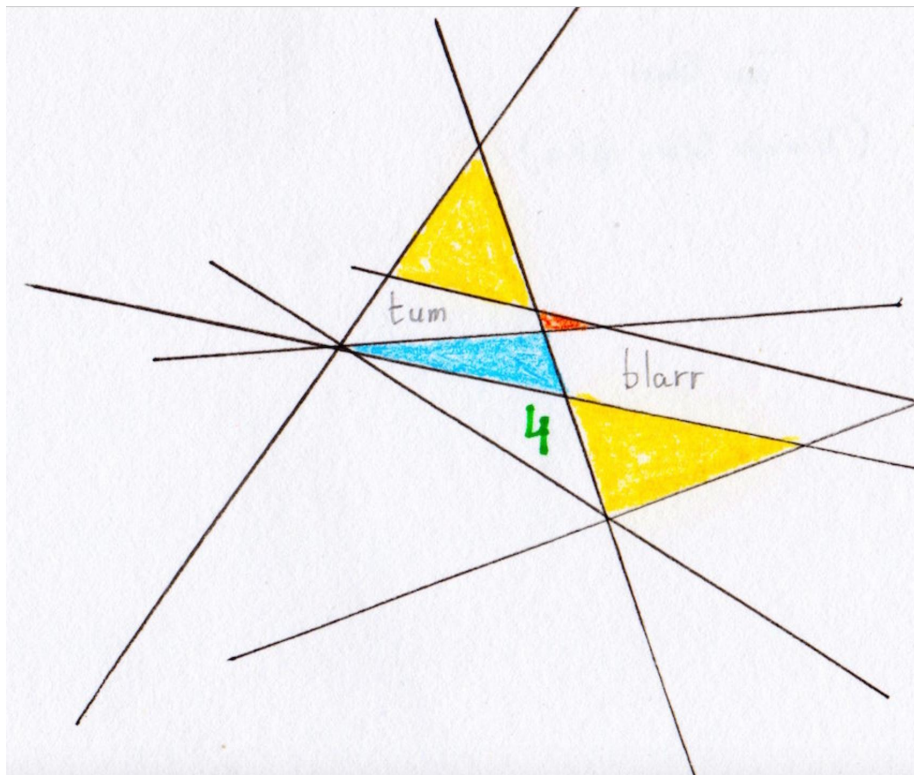
A little later I started to improvise with my voice, which was more natural and spontaneous than on the saxophone. I tried free improv on the saxophone, making all the possible sounds, but I found it never came out as I wanted it to. But with the voice, it was much better. So in the early 1980s I started improvising with the voice as well as performing the sound poetry. I also started integrating vocal parts in my compositions as well. I wrote a lot of experimental jazz pieces for my ensembles along with sound poetry lyrics.



*MT: What I find fascinating is how your scores are works of art in and of themselves.*

*JB: At first I used a normal alphabet to write my own sound poems, and then some were pronounced in French, some in Dutch, and some in German. But I found that to be too constrictive, so I studied the International Phonetic Alphabet, which has a lot more symbols at my disposal. The first scores were based completely on the International Phonetic Alphabet, then I also started to devise my own symbols for sounds that I made that were not represented in the Phonetic Alphabet.*

Later on it became sort of a visual thing in itself, although it's not always functional notation. I have a lot of books of my visual poetry coming out.



*MT: You said the second half of the show will include electronics — when did you start incorporating that into your poetry?*

JB: From the mid '90s, actually. At first I had a simple sampler and then in the late 90s, it became possible to use laptops for live sound — I had a PowerBook and a MacBook Pro. Now when I'm traveling I mostly use a laptop but when I'm closer to home, I have other equipment as well.

But I use different kinds of software, I have samples of my own voice and other samples that I create with in various different ways. It's mostly digital, but I also work with analog equipment when I'm home.

*MT: How many compositions do you have?*

JB: I have a database of my performances that begins in the 1970s, and there are 3,600 or something like that.

*MT: That's a lot.*

JB: It's not quite complete, especially in the earlier years. But for quite a while I've been diligently keeping it updated.

*MT: You also have your own recording label.*

JB: I started Kontrans Records in 1993, when I had two groups of recordings that no other label would put out. So, I thought, “Okay, I’ll do it myself.” A couple years later, there were two more recordings — it was not my intention to set up a label, but it kept growing. At that time, in the 90s, CD sales were still pretty good so it was easy to earn enough money to make new releases. Now there are a total of 30 CD releases on the label. But it’s getting really hard to sell CDs.

*MT: You have quite a bit of your music on Bandcamp.*

JB: That’s the best way to sell online — it’s easier than setting up your own webshop. It’s well known, especially in North America, I think about 80% of my sales are in North America.

*MT: How many people are doing what you do?*

JB: Not a lot. There are vocal improvisers, but they usually don’t write music, they just improvise. I do both. And maybe only a handful of people in the world that I know who do that.

*MT: back to the Cleveland show, what do people need to know before they go? Or is it best to not to know anything and simply experience the event?*

JB: At my shows there’s always a mix of people who are somehow acquainted with the venue and go there to see what happens. But there are also a lot of people who know my work — I have been touring the U.S. since 1994.

This will actually be my 39th tour of the U.S., so I have quite a network there. Over the years people have made long drives to get to a show of mine, like four or six hour drives. And people in the U.S. move around a lot more so than in Europe. For example I’ll be in Philadelphia and someone in the audience will say “I saw you in Oregon.”

*MT: Have you been to Cleveland before?*

JB: No, I’ve never been to Ohio. I had some shows in Ohio planned in the spring of 2020, when the tour had to be canceled due to COVID. So now I’m going to some of those places like Toledo and Columbus. After that I’ll drive to St. Louis to play with a trio that I have with Damon Smith on double bass, and Bob Moses on drums.

*MT: Is there anything else you would like to tell me, or that you think readers should know?*

JB: I'll bring a lot of my recent books and of course CDs — they can get them at the concert at very nice prices.

Click [here](#) to visit Jaap Blonk's website.

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