



RALF BRINKHOFF

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HANS PETER KUHN DESIGNS SOUND ENVIRONMENTS

Germany's Kuhn talks about his work

BY JOHN CALHOUN

The art of sound design is being redefined by Hans Peter Kuhn. Known in his native West Germany for his theatre design, Kuhn has taken his talents beyond the traditional proscenium and created what he refers to as "audio-environments", worlds where sound is an essential artistic component.

Kuhn's involvement with sound dates back to his years in a rock 'n' roll band as a youth in Kiel. In 1975, he became audio designer at Schaubuhne Berlin, a theatre where he remained until 1979. Subsequently, he has worked with such directors as Dieter Dorn, Luc Bondy, Peter Zadek, and Claus Peymann. It was at the Schaubuhne that he first worked with Robert Wilson on *Death, Destruction & Detroit*. He has since collaborated with Wilson on *the CIVIL warS*, *The Golden Windows*, *Le Martyre de St. Sebastien* and, most recently, *The Forest*.

Kuhn's "audio-environments" include *Fassungslos*, a 1988 installation in a Berlin gallery, which consisted of a 1.5-meter high mound of discarded pieces of light bulb glass. Lighting and speakers were built into the installation, making it a humming, illuminated sculpture. *Achtundacht*, a more recent installation, was in an abandoned railway station in Berlin, and included slide projections computer-synchronized with sound. An Atari computer with special music software was programmed to run eight projectors which rhythmically threw abstract color images onto tiny screens, while sounds in the same rhythm emanated from eight speakers along the walls of the space.

"All my work is with space and with rooms," says Kuhn. "In theatre, you have an auditorium that sits every night at the same spot, so you can do something based on a special location. You can say, 'I want a speaker here,' and know exactly what will happen. Because the sound will come from here, and it will affect the person who sits next to it in a way that's different from the way it affects a person who sits over there... you can make up spaces, and all your spaces within this theatre space create emotions in people in a different way than just by telling them a nice story."

Kuhn fully realized the emotionally powerful effect of sound during the recent production of the Robert Wilson-David Byrne collaboration, *The Forest*, which premiered at the Theatre der Freien Volkshalle in Berlin in 1988 e. V., and which subsequently appeared at the 1988 Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York. He confounded expectations with sound; in *The Forest* an actor sits in a metal tub dropping stones from his mouth. But instead of the sound of rocks hitting metal, the audience hears glass crashing. "It is very different from what you would expect," he says. "A glassy sound in a very big space. You can change the whole mood by changing this one sound effect."

Kuhn characterizes what he did in *The Forest* and in other pieces as creating an "audio space around the audience." He eschews a sound system that is centered on the stage: "I always have speak-

ers everywhere in the house." For *The Forest*, Kuhn positioned eight Meyer speakers onstage, and 16 speakers surrounding the auditorium. For a factory sequence in Act Two, Kuhn made an eight-track tape with eight different machine sounds, each of which emanated from different speakers onstage. Bird sounds came from auditorium speakers to make the audience feel as if it was part of the forest environment.

A PM-3000 Yamaha mixer with 40 inputs and 8 x 8 output "gives you many possibilities to configure where the sound has to go," says Kuhn. Since *The Forest* was to tour, another reason for choosing Yamaha was universal familiarity with and availability of the equipment.

In describing his sound worlds, Kuhn states: "An artist who does environments will have a room where things happen that are different from what the room usually would be, and this gives you a kick in the brain." Kuhn provides plenty of kicks.