Polytope Experiences through Iannis Xenakis and Beyond

Iannis Xenakis, *Le Polytope de Cluny*, 1972–74.
Courtesy Les Amis de Xenakis

A conversation between Viron Erol Vert, Matteo Pasquinelli, and Jazmina Figueroa

In this exchange, artist Viron Erol Vert and philosopher Matteo Pasquinelli discuss the convergence of art, nightlife culture, and the musical legacy of Iannis Xenakis. Their conversation sheds light on their connection to Berlin's nightlife scene and the intertwining personal experiences with Xenakis's experimental approach to sound and space. Exploring the multifaceted nature of his compositions and their pertinence to Viron Erol Vert's latest exhibition *The Hermit* at the Museum of Modern Art in Athens (EMST), Vert and Pasquinelli highlight the multidimensional nature of his compositions and their configurative relevance to the contemporary industrialization of technological automation.

Jazmina Figueroa: First, could you please explain to me how you two came together for the occasion of *The Hermit* (2023)?

Viron Erol Vert: We both met, if I remember correctly and consciously, at Berghain's entrance. I was working my second shift on that weekend and Matteo wanted to get into the club with a mutual friend. I guess that's something like twelve or fourteen years ago, which was a different club scene, a different Berlin, and a totally different world.

Then, I remembered that Matteo had mentioned in one of his texts a sculpture by me called *Abraham I* (2014–21) that I had built for the show of Peter Lang and Christoph Tannert for the forty-year anniversary of the Künstlerhaus Bethanien.

Besides that, we live in the same neighborhood in Berlin. So, sometimes we meet, mostly by chance at the same coffee place during our work and studio breaks. We know each other from different frames, layers, and moments that, in the end, have accumulated into a mutual exchange of our projects and exhibitions, like my current show, *The Hermit* at the Museum of Modern Art in Athens (EMST). Today, we met at the traffic lights of Schlesisches Tor by chance, maybe destiny, and we talked about finishing this interview – so, here we go.

Matteo Pasquinelli: Aside from extracurricular activities that contribute to our overlapping cognitive explorations, indeed, I once asked Viron if I could refer to his large sculpture *Abraham* I for a piece (in *e-flux journal*) on the metabolism of light, energy, and information – a piece in which I was also wondering and wandering around darkness as a metaphor of knowledge against the worn-out metaphor of »enlightenment.« Then over a cup of coffee, more recently, we went back to the pagan substrate of European culture that great historians such as Carlo Ginzburg investigated in his 2017 book, *Storia notturna*.

At least in Italian, *Storia notturna* is a very poetic title, an anthropological reference that again goes back to the many lives of the night.

JF: Viron, could you describe the significance of the nightclub setting that inspired the exhibition design of *The Hermit* and how that defines your connection to the work of Iannis Xenakis?

VEV: The connection and links between nightlife, Xenakis's work, and my artistic practice are manifold and are layered in multiple ways into my installation from different perspectives. First is my personal relation to Berlin nightlife, as I have worked since 1997 – over twenty-five years with some breaks – in Berlin nightlife as a bouncer, which started during my early studies at the university. I started to work at some SNAX parties and then at Ostgut, which became what is now known as Berghain. Beside that, I have worked at other clubs and spaces like Bunker, Rio, Club der Visionäre, Bar 25, Rio, White Trash, and so on.

Experiencing thousands of guests of all genders, sexual interests, and fetishes passing through the door with all their fears and hopes, but also with their expectations and witnessed experiences – watching human beings, layers of societies from different perspectives and understanding humans in relation to sound, light, drugs, and architecture in all these uncountable, endless party nights and weekends – has shaped my personality.

I actually understood this influence, which became a part of my current artistic practice, quite late. As it happened in an unplanned and unconscious way, almost effortlessly, I only realized this aspect of my work in the past few years. Maybe this understanding is also a question of age, as I feel I am entering a new period of my life.

In the end we are always the quintessence of our experiences, consciously or subconsciously. Nightlife and rave culture is like a parallel universe with its own rules, skills, and habits, maybe sometimes a bit more honest and unpatterned than the world outside of a club, but this seemingly endless freedom and hedonistic way of life can have challenges and confrontations, and this duality is what I feel resonates for me in Xenakis's works.

I personally think that the intensity in his work, and complementary, complex atmosphere, is linked to his experiences as a young man of his generation and their topics. Iannis Xenaxis, born in 1922 in Romania, moved to Athens in 1938, and lived through the civil war in Greece and the turmoils of the global World War II atmosphere before he fled to Paris in 1947. Being injured during street fights in Athens, where he lost an eye at a young age, and later experienced not being able to enter his homeland for about thirty years because he was sentenced to death, certainly had a strong influence on his artistic path. I believe that Xenakis's practice has also influenced the current club culture through his experimental approach to binding and connecting sound, light, architecture, body, and science.

His projects are still very unique, even seen from today's perspective. In the early stages of his career, he experimented in different directions and approached amazing »futuristic« laser shows and visionary compositions in a more intellectual, scientific way than what emerges out of today's club culture perspectives. His wish to give each sound a place and its freedom without classically judging whether the sound is good or bad metaphorically correspond with the respect for and openness to all kinds of different life forms, genders, fetishes, and queer lifestyles in a hedonistic club culture context.

I also feel a very ancient and archaic energy in his work, which is like an essence of life – something that connects, and this link to archaic atmospheres can also be found in the contemporary club culture.

JF: Matteo, within the context of Xenakis's musical scoring, how does the mechanization of musical references relate to interactivity with machines, cognition, and affect for you?

Viron Erol Vert, *Abraham I* (2014), brass, wood, steel, various sizes, Global Art Festival, 2021, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg. Photo: Daniel Karman

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Viron Erol Vert, *The Hermit*, National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST), Athens, 2023.
Photo: Paris Tavitian

MP: In a piece I co-authored for the catalog published for the 2023 Venice Biennale of Music, I discussed how Xenakis had the intuition to expand the traditional »dimensions« of music into a multidimensional space. He wanted to explode and project both the score and the space of performance with the use of a new media in a format that he called a »polytope« (which in Greek means »many places« or »spaces«).

In 1972, his renowned *Polytope de Cluny* mesmerized audiences at the Musée national du Moyen Âge in Paris with intricate lights, projections, and sound choreographed through numerous cables in the chapel. This operation may appear »abstract,« but it is a misunderstanding. I think Xenakis was perceiving the complexification of society and following it with a new (multidimensional) kind of music, as many other artists have been doing.

Here we should try to resist the typical opposition between body and mind, practice and theory that I see so often repeated in the art world and art schools (like my beloved HfG Karlsruhe where I've been teaching for seven years). The reason I'm interested in AI and automation in general is not that because I have some fetish for abstraction, but because I perceive that technologies are always a concretion, a crystallization of the diagram of collective behavior, of the scheme of our body movements, of the constellation of our actions and affects, including dance and religious rituals. I see the polytope of Xenakis as the attempt to imagine a larger collectivity and not abstract music per se.

JF: Viron, how did you incorporate elements like architectural models, mathematics, geometric shapes, and the Fibonacci sequence[1] in your installation *The Hermit*, and where were these aspects located in Xenakis's work?

VEV: There are two main paths I have developed in parallel to one another – one was to analyze the museum space in his measurements, sizes, forms, and characteristics. Out of that, I prepared with my team a 3D plan of the space to understand it from all directions, views, and levels. As I also personally believe that space is like a living entity, my spatial installations always try to open a communication and conversation with the space my work is shown within. It is the kind of relationship the installation wants to start, when I migrate with a project into a space for a period, and at the end I share an experience or a dialogue with the space. Therefore, the architectural structure gives or adds a certain frame, beat, and pulse to the artistic approach and development, but at the same time the space is purposely defragmented and taken over through the artistic intervention in certain moments – almost dissolving and reflecting – depending on the perspective.

The second path I took was that I have tried to understand Xenakis's life and works from different perspectives – the historical, biographical, musical, scientific, and so on, but also the emotional. I then found out about his piece written between 1950 and 1951, called »Six chansons pour piano«, that actually many years later (I guess around the year 2000), was officially confirmed as his first written sound piece. Xenakis himself never officially not naming it as such, as maybe he felt still undefined in his artistic language? This suite features plenty of Romanian and Greek folk elements and through these six short piano pieces, he was trying to find his cultural roots, his identity, and his cultural origins, that suddenly became important to him. I found it therefor inspiring to work in this project with the number 6, as this six chansons pieces were his starting point and a key element of becoming a musician and artist.

As a migrant and being forced to live/work far away of his homeland for a long period of his life – working on these pieces at that stage of his career, were also a possibility to reconnect to his culture, tradition, and source and that I feel is essential for the path of an artist. Beside that, I mostly work on concepts concerning numerology and build upon the significance of numbers. Also to mention here is that I especially liked the very fresh, even

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uncertain and experimental, approach in these six piano pieces. Especially the flexibility, lightness, and the relation of the six pieces to each other felt so diverse and rich, yet not too fixed and this atmosphere I wanted to integrate into my concept.

Another inspiration I took on in 2014 for the *Abraham I* sculpture is the Fibonacci series. Xenakis had worked with and used the Fibonacci series already in his early time as an engineer working for Le Corbusier on many projects. The relation to nature and rhythm but also the topic of balance and deconstruction are things I'm very inspired by, and these complementary atmospheres were present in Xenakis's work and therefore I wanted to bring this aspect into my installation.

In the end, everything that you see in *The Hermit* is built on the number six and the Fibonacci series. We have six colors in six steps ascending in two directions; six sound-chime pavilions with six divisible numbers of chimes. All the color steps, all the lengths of chimes, and heights of pavilions are developed from the Fibonacci series. We also have six sound pieces by six sound artists giving a contemporary glimpse into Xenakis's vision. Through these seemingly quite strict rules, we could build a space within the space that tries to override given measures and perspectives but with the wish to find balance in chaos or chaos in balance, a composition that brings all the different perspectives, materials, surfaces, forms, lines, and colors into relation.

JF: Matteo, when we listen, we might engage in abstract thinking, a process of cognition that is not tied to the particular situated experience of listening. How can we speculate that a process like this might relate to or can even be achieved with automation?

MP: My opinion is that when we listen to or make music, we don't engage in either abstract or concrete thinking, but the imbrication of the two. More importantly, we try to follow, to engage in a collective configuration and constellation of our life. The process of listening, as much as the one of thinking, is always related to a situated experience – as both neurology and studies in alternate states of mind are teaching us. The dream of military and industrial automation since the time of cybernetics has been indeed the dream of a disembodied mind. What has been achieved with automation (see deep neural networks) is the automation of specific mechanical tasks (such as pattern recognition and generation), not the automation of the experience of thinking and listening, which is something else, art is telling us.

1 In mathematics, the Fibonacci sequence is a series in which each number is the sum of the two preceding ones.

Viron Erol Vert was raised in an intercultural family environment straddling northern Germany, Istanbul (Turkey), and Athens (Greece). He currently divides his time between Berlin (Germany) and the Mediterranean region. His artistic practice addresses questions of identity and affinity to different aspects and perspectives of the personal and the foreign. His own multicultural imprint plays a key role in his research processes, as does his close connection to various club cultural contexts in Berlin. Vert's works, which are fundamentally characterized by the state and atmosphere of being in-between, weave together different cultures, materials, languages, forms of expression, ways of seeing, and views of life into a hybrid, complementary identity.

Matteo Pasquinelli is associate professor in Philosophy of Science at the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage of Ca' Foscari University in Venice. In 2023, he published *The Eye of the Master: A Social History of Artificial Intelligence* with Verso Books.

Jazmina Figueroa is a writer based in Berlin.