

Two Norway-based Artists Performed An Experimental Music Concert Structured Around Sweater Patterns

: 2/15/2023

To conclude the [world premiere of *Identity Pitches*](#), a performance of graphic scores structured around Norwegian sweater knitting patterns at the Flamboyán Theater at the Clemente Soto Véllez Cultural and Educational Center in early February, artists Stine Janvin and [Cory Arcangel](#) did a bit of acapella.

For the first 50 or so minutes of the show, Janvin and Arcangel, who hail from Stavanger, [Norway](#) and Buffalo, New York respectively, played a set of music that, guided by those scores, fluctuated between accessibility and dissonance. Performed in collaboration with the New York violin duo String Noise and presented by Brooklyn's ISSUE Project Room, the set blended elements of experimental composition, traditional Norwegian folk music, and contemporary electronic dance music into a microtonal stew.

The grand finale, however, bordered on straight up folk. The artists traded lines from "Per Spellman," a famous Norwegian song Janvin has sung to her children. The duo performed the song unadulterated, save for autotune, which came on loud-and-clear for Janvin and far more muted for Arcangel. Still, Arcangel attacked the performance with gusto.

"We decided earlier today that if it was going to be a success, I had to really lean into it," Arcangel said of the acapella ending after the show.

That statement could perhaps be extrapolated to express Arcangel's entire relationship to Norway, which he moved to in 2015. His wife, Hanne Mugaas, is the curator and director of the contemporary art institution Kunsthall Stavanger there.

Prior to the move, Arcangel had spent over a decade in New York, where he established himself as one of his generation's foremost technology-aware artists. He became known for an output that blended conceptual rigor with pop cultural levity, often using outmoded consumer tech, like defunct video games, as well as more contemporary internet-based materials. Institutional success followed: at 24, he was included in the 2002 Whitney Biennial; nine years later, at 33, he became the youngest artist to take over a floor at that same institution. In 2014, the artist started Arcangel Surfware, a lifestyle brand with the internet-enthusiast in mind.

His move to Stavanger, Norway, a small seaside city known for oil extraction and surfing, forced the artist to slow down, he told me at a rehearsal the day before the performance.

"It took me years. Years," Arcangel said of his slow assimilation into the mild Norwegian temperament. But now the artist takes daily swims in fjords and relaxes in a sauna.

Arcangel even bought what he called “the Ferrari of raincoats,” a jacket by Bergen, Norway-brand Norwegian Rain, who describe themselves as “a [sartorial take on 100% waterproof outerwear](#) inspired by Japanese sensibility & life in the rainiest city of Europe.” The purchase was a major sign of the artist’s full Norwegian turn, according to Janvin.

“It’s like in New York, you just go out and you’re never wearing the right clothes, you’re freezing and that’s how I was [in Norway] for like six years,” Arcangel said, of life in a town whose winter climate is mostly rainy and just a hair above freezing. Then he showed off a piece of long underwear peeking out from the bottom of his pants. “I know all the tricks now,” he said.

Identity Pitches is one result of Arcangel’s committed expatriation. The duo met at a playground in Stavanger with both of their kids in tow. He had already been a fan of Janvin, having seen her piece *Fake Synthetic Music* performed live in Stavanger (until two years ago, Janvin resided in Berlin). The piece filled a black box theater with fog, smoke and yellow stroboscopes, rendering the space extremely foggy, smoky, and yellow.

“It’s supposed to be an immersive, very physical, concert experience,” Janvin said, of the club-informed piece. Arcangel couldn’t believe the performance was happening in his current hometown. At first, he thought it sounded like an alarm going off.

“For me, this is exactly the music that I want to hear and see live,” he said.

A friendship and slow collaboration followed, first on a logo Arcangel created for Janvin, which was ultimately printed on a wafer and eaten at a performance and, then, later, on a book. Published by Primary Information, *Identity Pitches* is full of scores and sweater patterns—both traditional and “[deep fried](#),” the latter referring to a style of meme in which an image is repeatedly degraded, usually through a manual process. Arcangel created a script to perform this operation randomly and mechanically—the code for which is included in the book—and applied it to the sweater images.

The book also contains a conversation between the two artists that touches on the history of that famous sweater, also known as a lusekofte, which the book explains is the rare item of Norwegian clothing worn by everyone from hipsters to bank robbers. It also gets into the rural roots of the country’s folk music. In it, Arcangel observes that it shares microtonal qualities with certain Eastern music.

It’s that folk music that played over the speakers before and after the performance, flanking a set that was anything but traditional: select moments sounded like techno music minus the kick drum; others had an ear-piercing resonant drone. String Noise trilled over Arcangel’s laptop synth; Janvin ran sometimes-improvised vocals through effects. At one point, Arcangel took out a MIDI guitar and attempted to solo through the software synthesizer Massive. Arcangel spoke over the mic in what sounded like competent Norwegian to Janvin’s husband Morton Joh, who was running sound and providing tuning pitches for the string players.

“That’s always a big thing—it takes a lot of time, you have to listen to them tuning their instruments,” Janvin said, of the traditional folk performances in her country.

The artists admitted that, until around four weeks ago, they had scores but no music. When it came time to play, they gave themselves certain liberties.

“We’re breaking all of the rules, basically,” Janvin said of a performance loosely based around the visual notation of three different sweater patterns. “There are scores and instructions in the book, but we’re not following them at all.”

The show read like an off-kilter love letter to the artists’ current home, and contained both references to EDM aesthetics and quite a bit of in-between-song banter, itself another nod to the folk history of Norway, which has a tradition of interstitial storytelling, according to Janvin. The country was late to modernize; until 1976, according to Arcangel, there was only one restaurant in Stavanger, a fact that changed rapidly after an oil boom and an influx of Americans.

About that boom: Arcangel spoke of Stavanger natives with Texas accents. He talked about ONS, an oil trade show that happens every three years in the town. Arcangel likened it to “the Art Basel of oil.” Janvin said she was “obliged to go” as a child. Arcangel now always makes it a point to attend.

“It’s all different now, because I get to see, like, extraction, I get to see how the world works,” Arcangel said, of his life in the oil-rich Stavanger, which also contains a NATO base. “Because in New York, you can’t really—it’s all layers built upon layers in New York. Somebody could live their whole life in one of these layers, moving money around. But in Stavanger ... you try to make an appointment with someone and they’re like, ‘Oh I’m offshore, I’m like literally going out to the sea to take up this stuff so the lights can be on in France next month.’”

For Arcangel, the experience of being so close to the crude stuff has fundamentally altered how he looks at making work.

“It’s very helpful for me, after having lived so long in New York,” he said.