

1. A STORY OF BREAD

Although **Breadwoman** stands outside of time, she is abundant in the ingredients of 1980s Los Angeles performance art, renegade DIY punk, gallery culture, galvanized jazz, underground cassette-trading culture, drag extravaganzas, and esoteric meaning-making mysticism.

Anna Homler is a vocal, visual and performance artist based in Los Angeles. She has performed and exhibited her work in venues around the world. With a sensibility that is both ancient and post-modern, Homler sings in an improvised melodic language. Her work explores alternative means of communication and the poetics of ordinary things. She creates perceptual interventions by using language as music and objects as instruments.

Anna Homler performed during the CTM festival in Berlin alongside Steven Warwick (better known as **Heatsick**) and **Natsuko Kono**.



We met **Anna** and **Matt Werth** from **RVNG Intl.** in the lobby of a nice hotel in Berlin, in the last evening of the festival. Here's the result of our roundtable conversation.

Anna: **Steve Moshier**. I heard his music, he had a group called **Cartesian Reunion Memorial Orchestra** in the 80's, and it was like music I've never heard before. It was minimal, it was dangerous and it was beautiful at the same time. He's a really intense guy; one of a kind. I approached him, because I had all these cassettes and these songs that I was singing and I didn't really know what to do with them. He went through them all and he took the ones that were the least song like – landscapes -he worked with those and he arranged them. So, for instance 'Ee Chê' wasn't really 'Ee Chê'. He found the word 'Ee Chê' and he repeated it. I was thinking today about it and it was because of this arrangement that I had to learn the song over, because there never was a chorus. He emphasized it. and then "Yesh' Te" is 'Ee Chê' backwards; I had to learn that. I had to swallow my songs.

So you've actually kind of invented a new language.

Anna: Well, it bubbled up. It found me.

Can you tell us something about the way you relate to your voice in your art?

Anna: It happened organically, so I didn't think, I just trusted it. I just followed it. But you know my art, **Matt**. What would you say? I'm still in it. It's like I'm a fish and this is my ocean. And my ocean has a pharmacy, it has a whale, it has all these characters and things, but it's too close for me. I have to jump out of the aquarium and be able to say "oh, it looks like this". It's just my world. But what is it looking like to you, **Matt**?

Matt: It's fascinating, segmented into these different characters, environments and then they all interweave at various points. **Breadwoman** hasn't appeared in the past six months; she has been around for years.

Anna: She was just sleeping.

What inspired the emergence of Breadwoman as a character?

Anna: I think that I'm interested in human psychology, in the unconscious. I'm interested in the things not in front of you, but over here, you know? Like if you had eyes in the back of your head, what would you see? It's like those kind of curious things that don't make sense... I'm really influenced a lot by film. I really love film. Especially these English filmmakers from the '50s, when I was growing up. All these movies had a lot of passion, loss and beauty. I really love beauty. Our world tries to destroy beauty, it's not trusted, because the beauty we see is manufactured, it's corporate beauty. I just go for what I'm attracted to and then I find out why, after the fact. I wanted to wear bread and because I was a performance artist, I had permission. I could wear bread. I wanted to go out in the world with my face made of bread.

Why bread?

Anna: Because bread looks like flesh and it's very mysterious. At that time I was working in a book store that was close to an elder home, so you would see all the time, in Westwood Village, these old ladies crossing the street and I would look at them and their skin looked like bread. Sometimes I'd look at bread and I would see faces. So... I just saw it.

2. SONIC LANGUAGE

It's also an essential element for humanity, everybody eats bread.

Anna: Also, yes. In Japan, there is this animated character called Anpanman. His face is made out of bread and if someone is hungry, they can take a bite out of his face. He feeds people and it's okay, you can eat his face. You can never eat Breadwoman's face, but you can eat this character's face, because his father is a baker and he can make a new face for him. I want to research that, because there are a lot of myths about bread and this is the most recent. There's also a famous girl on Instagram from Brooklyn, who smashes her face into bread.

Matt: She has this huge Instagram following, like 60.000 people and she just takes pieces of bread and smashes them against her face. It's not a fetishized thing.

Is she doing it with a reason?

Matt: I think it's a social experiment, because she's not an artist per se, she's a writer. I think she thinks it's really funny.

Anna: She thinks it's funny?

Matt: She thinks it's hilarious.

Anna: Really? I took it very seriously. In the performance, earlier, Natsuko Kono did a thing with the baseball bat and the bread, almost shocking. It was like 'oh my God, you're being silly!' And I am specific about my art, like 'Don't do that! Don't break this spell!'. But this is me. I'm just saying the context. Everyone is laughing, was really funny, but for me it was like 'Whoa!' because I take it very seriously. One time someone told me while I was playing 'you're like a brain surgeon'.

Matt: You can't really laugh at your performance surgery...

Anna: No, but it's very serious. I take my sounds very seriously and every little toy I have, every little object has one sound that is special for that. It's very specific how I play.

Can you tell us a bit more about the concept behind the language?

Anna: It's singular, it just came out. The fascinating thing is that I was once playing with a man from Africa and he spoke Mandingo. He was an African guy from Sweden who's unfortunately not alive anymore. His name was Malando Gassama; he used to play with ABBA and he was living in L.A. in Laurel Canyon. I met him at my friend's wedding, she introduced us because she thought I should play with him and we could sing together. I mean, he would sing in Mandingo and I would sing in my language and it really sounded great. He said I was actually singing African words. One time I sang with Inuit women and it was really fitting. I sang with throat singers at a festival in Austria, in a castle. This was so crazy. Our performance was in an Ice Age museum and they had to keep it really cold to preserve the giant woolly mammoths. They had reconstructed woolly mammoths and because they were woolly, moths ate them, so they had to refrigerate everything. It was freezing cold and when you were on stage, it was like being in a train station in the middle of winter and fog was coming out of your mouth and I thought "Okay, this is one of the strangest situations I've ever played in". But this has nothing to do with your question, I'm just remembering.

I think it's a very basic language, a very basic sonic language.

With no significance.

Anna: No semantics, just sound. The Hawaiian language has twelve letters. That's like my language.

But if you'd have to translate it, what do you think it would mean?

Anna: I think it's images.

What kind of images?

Anna: Different songs have different images. Like, I always thought that in the CD, "Ee Chè" was kind of a working song and then I thought that "Oo Nu Dah" was an image of water and flowers, like going in a circle. Just images.

Does it happen to you to see images and then build a song around them?

Anna: No, it's the other way round. The song comes first.

3. CHILDHOOD

You were saying that you find similarities between bread and skin. Does it influence you in any way to find all these similarities and also to hear that your language sounds like African?

Anna: It's not really a very intellectual process. It's spontaneous more than intellectual. I wish I could say more, but you know... Breadwoman came to me. She came slowly and then afterwards I did the research. The image came, the feelings came and the songs came. This happens over time, not like a crash course, six weeks. This is a lot of work.

How would you describe your childhood?

Anna: My childhood? A nightmare! (laughs) Which is why I'm having my childhood now.

Can you tell us a little about the music you listened to in your childhood and teenage years? Is there anything that marked you creatively during those years?

Anna: When I was a child, I listened to show tunes.... the music of Rogers and Hammerstein, for instance. My parents had LPs from all the musicals.... South Pacific, Carousel, The King and I were the ones I remember. My friends and I would make up stories and dance to the music. In my teenage years I listened to Motown and Blues...primarily female singers...but the men were BB King, Otis Redding, The Miracles, Sam and Dave and Howard Tate. I loved the Supremes, Martha and the Vandellas, Irma Frankin, Ann Peebles, Memphis Minnie, Carla Thomas, Mary Wells, Lorraine Ellison, Fontella Bass and Candy Staton. I also liked the Marvellettes, another Motown group. There were a lot of girl groups at that time, too. After I saw Fellini's Juliet of the Spirits, I became fascinated by the film music of Nina Rota. I also liked the music and instruments of Harry Partch and Noh Theater.



When I was in graduate school, I lived in Cambridge, Mass., near the Coop record store and found a lot of amazing albums. I loved strange instrumentals, music box sounds, toy piano world, as well as classical music. I was never a big straight pop music person, but liked and still like, mysterious, evocative and somewhat unusual music. I still tend to listen to the same recordings over and over and over again.

How do you relate to the younger generation?

Anna: I'm just starting to. I try to ignore everything. (laughs) Have you ever seen those Victorian chairs that look like elephant ears? That's where I was and now I'm meeting a lot of younger people and I really connect with them. But for years I was sort of in a bubble. My father was dying and I was taking care of him and that was a whole parallel universe. I had to stop making music and just focus on that.

4. CATEGORIES

What is your view on the scarcity of women musicians, performers or DJs?

Anna: Sitting next to Matt is the closest I've ever come to the music industry. Earlier, Matt said "I'm a businessman".

Matt: No, I said that some people perceive me as a businessman. I don't think I am. I don't know what I am.

Anna: I think you are. But that's another discussion. Matt is amazing and he is so much that I don't know where to put him in my brain. So it's interesting for me. I've always been an outsider. I haven't been commercial. There was never a category for my music, except for maybe experimental, you know? Maybe weird woman vocalist. One day in Amsterdam, I got two rejection letters from VPRO programmers. One letter said I was too avant-garde and the other said I wasn't avant-garde enough. I was young and maybe naïve and the world was different and I thought, 'oh I'm singing this language, I will just go around, get it in record stores; and people were unbelievably open. So I went with a suitcase of Breadwoman cassettes and I went to Europe, to Amsterdam. I couldn't find the underground. What I found was people saying that 'performance art is dead. Go back to California. Oh, you're not from New York? Who do you know that we know?' And I didn't know the right people, I wasn't from NY, I was from LA. I wasn't on this map; I didn't exist in this map at all."

I had one friend in radio and happened to meet an English promoter on the show and I ended up in London recording - kind of - house music with Voices of Kwahn. And then it was like connect the dots. The Pylon King (his real name is Mark Davies) had a publishing deal and had a lot of recording gear. We recorded in his bedsit, and the next thing I knew we had a dance LP, Three Whale Trip. It was this crazy thing; that was my hit. That was my commercial moment, because we got big royalties, a label in Ibiza put us on a compilation album. And the music was really ahead of its time, at that time, early '90s. I didn't realize it was happening. You just go to the next thing, and the next thing and whatever it is, you are not thinking what's going to happen.

And to answer your question, I don't think I see any scarcity of woman in music. Actually I do and I don't. It depends where you are looking. The London improvised music scene has many strong women players. Brussels, too.

5. A NEED TO CREATE

You were saying earlier that people started to become interested in Breadwoman.

Anna: Because of Matt.

But do you think they were interested in the concept or in the music itself?

Anna: I don't know, what do you think?

Or both? Or neither?

Anna: I think both.

There's this mysterious character and the music and the instrumentation, which is really like ahead of its time sonically, and also the voices and the language, which you say doesn't exist in any semantic form.

Anna: Oh, it does exist. I'm sure it exists. It's an idiolect. If only one person speaks a language it's an idiolect and it's a dialect when a group of people speaks it. Yoko Ono said that "two people create a reality". If you have agreement, then you have a reality. You just need one other person.

What does Breadwoman mean as a character?

Anna: I can imagine her jumping off the page. I mean, this time around I can imagine Breadwoman in outer space. I'd see Breadwoman talking to the stars. A friend of mine drew this for me, these breads in space.

Matt: It's like Beats In Space; the bakery side.

Anna: Matt heard me say this a thousand times, but if you look closely at bread, you can see a Moon. You can see a planet. If you dig a hole into bread you can see a Universe. It has the macro and the micro. So I imagine her as a character and she will have a new life now. I don't know what, but I imagine she could. I'm still digesting seeing Natsuko dancing, you know?

What would you say is the driving force behind materializing all these ideas and manifestations of Breadwoman?

Anna: I think creative intelligence that underlies everything. Does this sound too general? It's just a need to create. You need to create.

It's coming from within?

Anna: Yeah. Like a plant. You don't ask the plant "what are you doing?" A plant doesn't have an appointment book. It's just growing. I believe in things evolving.

So are you thinking of these ideas or do they come out spontaneously? What's the creative process?

Anna: Lately, since Breadwoman, I've been working with improvisers. So it's totally in the moment. I can think of an idea like 'oh I'd like to do a CD with duets with people', but in the moment it's just working with people. I love improvising and that's what I mostly do and what I have done since Breadwoman. I also have a pharmacy. If you go on my website you can find Pharmacia Poetica. For over twenty years I've had a pharmacy where I bottled things. It's about the shift from literal to the poetic. The Pharmacia Poetica takes very ordinary things and shows how marvelous and beautiful they are.

6. TO BREATHE

Do you ever wonder about how the things you are doing and creating are going to be perceived? Is there an outcome you're trying to get to?

Anna: I don't know. I have been focused on the logistics of this tour.

Is there a certain type of audience you'd like to reach?

Anna: No, I don't. I don't have a picture for it. Probably young artistic types if I had to choose. Creative people.

How does a normal day look for you?

Anna: There is no normal day.

What's your routine then?

Anna: I have a micro routine, but I can't really say what it is.

Is it a realistic thing to have high expectations from your work?

Anna: I don't think I do anymore. I think I've changed. I think about things differently now. If I can just do my work and have the means to do my work and have an audience, I'm really happy. I don't need to be Laurie Anderson, but if I can just do my work and travel to play in Europe, what can be better? That's my goal; to continue. For an artist it's enough to survive, that's already a lot, it's a huge thing.

Do you think an artist should be separated from his work?

Anna: Sometimes people who do great work are actually not very easy to be around. Artists who do great work have to be focused and intense focus can feel like selfishness to other people.

But over the years they would be remembered for their work.

Anna: Yes, not because they were jerks. (laughs) It's like a sea shell, the animal dies but the shell remains.

Could you tell us if you got any good advice from musicians that you admire or you follow?

Anna: To breathe. That's the best advice I've ever got.

