

three french artists place retro-tech
at the heart of their unique, exclusively
live musico-cinematic creations

intersections of
VISION and
SOUND
la cellule d'intervention
metamkine

BY CHRIS KENNEDY

t

HE PERFORMANCE STARTS SLOWLY. The light of a 16mm film projector, softly dimmed, bounces off the screen. The quiet whirr of the projector's mechanism fills the room as the machine gradually increases its speed. A second moving image appears on the screen, superimposed on the first, and a slowly rising static drone joins the hum of projectors. The image flickers slightly and then it starts to burn in the projector's gate, bubbling away from the heat of the bulb. The screen fills with the pop of a blinding light that sets off a sonic fireburst, and the performance tumbles into full swing.



PHOTO BY JAMIE TOOD



For the next forty minutes, *La Célule d'Intervention Metamkine*, a live performance trio from Grenoble, fuses the worlds of expanded cinema and improvisatory music in a visceral live experience, reminiscent of the sound and light shows of the 1960s and '70s that attempted to go beyond the possibilities of a single image and a single screen. The two projectionists in *Metamkine* move between eight 16mm film projectors and an assortment of filters, lights, and visual tricks, building layers of images on top of each other. Shadows of projectors are cast onto the screen, film celluloid melts and live chemical processing of film stock induces visual transformations. Meanwhile, a musician uses radio waves, electrical hums, and pre-recorded tape loops to both react to and spur on the filmic melee. Contact mikes attached to short-wave radios, electrical transformers, and various metal objects send sound waves through Revox tape recorders and Korg synthesizers to bend them into new shapes and pulses. At times, the music builds to a drone that matches a calmer onscreen section; at other times, the three performers produce a visual and sonic cacophony, intensely prodding one another in a growling and sputtering mechanical reverie. Sonically mirroring the actions of the projectionists, the musician deftly moves from one sound to the other, negotiating his mixing board to control the various electrical sounds he produces with his equipment.

Though film performance is a novel practice in itself, what further distinguishes *Metamkine's* performance is that the three collaborators assume a band-like stance in front of the screen. They achieve this by aiming their multiple projectors towards the audience at two large-scale mirrors positioned to reflect the images back onto the screen. With audio interpretation of the events unfolding

at centre stage and the image manipulation taking place before the audience, the conventions of classical stage set-up are contravened. Projectors normally relegated to a closed booth behind the audience now take the main stage, revealing the means of production in a structural strategy at the heart of *Metamkine's* work.

Jérôme Noetinger, Xavier Quérel, and Christophe Auger, the trio that make up *Metamkine*, have been intervening in the traditions of film and sound art for the past fifteen years. As active members of an art scene based in Grenoble, they have developed a truly improvisational and independent artistic life: controlling how they produce, exhibit, and disseminate their images and sound, and openly sharing their knowledge with other like-minded artists.

The first stirrings of *Metamkine* date back to 1987, when Jérôme Noetinger arrived in Grenoble to study under Xavier Garcia at Fontaine's *Collectif de recherche électroacoustique et d'action musicale*. Common interest in music and film brought him together with photographer Christophe Auger, filmmaker François-Christophe Marzal and musician Richard Antez to form *Metamkine*. They were interested in using compositional techniques from the studio in a live setting, as well as in developing new ways to work with music and image. In the initial performances, Auger and Marzal would project slides while Antez and Noetinger would play back pre-recorded compositions as accompaniment. The group began to evolve and they started using Super 8 projectors and live improvised music.

Marzal and Antez eventually left the group to continue their own respective careers in film and music. Xavier Quérel, who had attended *Metamkine* shows religiously as a university student, quickly moved to

take their place. In 1991 he officially joined the group, creating the core trio that has continued to this day, with occasional expansions to include other projectionists and musicians. Within a few short years, the trio had made the two major discoveries that lie at the core of the live experience they create. They moved all the performers to the front stage and started developing all the film they would use in performance by hand, without the aid of a traditional film lab.

Before Quérel joined, their set-up was quite traditional, with the projectors in the back and the musicians on the stage. As their performances became more involved, they found that the audience would often crane their necks to see how the projectionists were creating the visual collages on screen. Moving everything to the front provided for a more performative presentation style and allowed the trio to interact more like musicians. As a result, the trio has built a strong improvisatory bond. In performance, the three of them are able to respond to each other instinctively, drawing the audience into an intimate experience.

When Auger and Quérel decided to start processing their film themselves, they really began to expand the possibilities of their performance work, as well as the general culture of filmmaking surrounding them. Auger had worked for seven years in a high-end photography lab before giving that up for *Metamkine*, and had learned about processing and developing photography there. Initially, Auger and Quérel would process their Super 8 and 16mm film in buckets, but they soon decided to set up a small laboratory in a corner room of the 102, a local squatted arts and performance space. As video was becoming more prominent, they were able to find more and more



La Cellule d'Intervention Metamkine performs at Soundplay Festival, 2005

equipment to commandeer for their own work.

They soon amassed enough equipment to hand-process more regularly, and, with the help of fellow filmmakers Gaëlle Rouard and Etienne Caire, they opened up their lab to the public as Atelier MTK. The lab had a contact printer, an optical printer and the ability to make releasable film prints. It was set up as a co-operative, requiring filmmakers to pay only for the basic material fees in order to hand-process their own prints. The lab was hugely successful and filmmakers travelled from across France to use the facilities. Quérel and Auger found that they had to book a block of time months in advance in order to do their own work there. In response, they started encouraging the founding of other small, co-operative regional labs in France and Switzerland, and began to scale back their own services. While Atelier MTK continues to run in a more limited capacity, there are a half dozen other microlabs continuing their work

across the country.

Beyond the ability to create new images and even to work with chemicals onstage to stunning effect, the culture of hand-processing was quick to affect the ethos of Metamkine and their surrounding fellow filmmakers. Although Noetinger does not make films, he is quick to explain the importance of hand-processing on a filmmaker's self-reliance: "I can make a tape recording and I can listen to it immediately, but when you take some pictures with a Super 8 or 16mm camera, if you want to see the image, you have to send it to a laboratory that will develop the image for you. Then there is this copy of your work that doesn't belong to you, which to me is a very classical way of being alienated. [Creating your own] lab is a way of being able to control all levels of artistic work."

This notion of independence is very important to Metamkine. As Auger states, "it's important for us to live outside of Paris, where the main film centre is, and to be able to make



film without much money. You just need film stock.” This independence also relies on a sense of interdependence, something that Noetinger does not see as much of in the music world. “To see the people of the Atelier working together to create seven or eight labs across France is really good ... Musicians are not able to work together at the same level as a film co-op.”

It is towards this notion of interdependence that the trio has worked in organisations outside of Metamkine. Since reducing their activities with Atelier MTK, Quérel and Auger have continued to teach processing workshops, and Auger works with his partner Laure Sainte-Rose at Ad Libitum, a preservation laboratory that restores experimental films, home movies, and other noncommercial work. Noetinger writes for the music magazine, *Revue et Corrigée*, and distributes small label improvisational music and *musique concrète* through his non-profit distribution company, also called Metamkine. The label is probably best

known for the Cinéma pour l’oreille imprint that produced a series of thirty mini-CDs throughout the late ’90s. In addition, all three perform in various ensembles, and have programmed for the 102. Originally a squat in Grenoble, 102 rue d’Alembert has become a city-recognized (but still proudly self-sufficient) venue for music, performance, and film screenings. Noetinger speaks of all this activity as driven by a deep commitment to “make things happen.”

This interdependence is also reflected in the trio’s performance style, which relies heavily on improvisation. They treat the projectors like musical instruments, with Quérel and Auger able to quickly move from one to the other to keep up with the flow of the performance. Their proximity within the performance space keeps them attentive to each other’s movements. As Quérel states, “In performing live, we know each other, our styles; but it’s always completely based on live improvisation ... I am very sensitive to the other projectors, listening to what is happening ... This

relationship that you can have is really important.” Noetinger, who performs regularly with Lionel Marchetti and MIMEO, amongst others, points out that the greatest difference in working with Auger and Quérel is that cinema creates a different sense of time. The pace is defined by the mechanical speed of the projector, which allows his musical responses to evolve at a slower speed. Otherwise, “when I’m working with Christophe and Xavier, I feel like they’re just musicians.”

When talking about their work, a key idea that the trio often brings up is the Situationist ideal of *détournement*. Coined by Guy Debord, *détournement* roughly translates into the idea of collage, putting two different things together to create something new and unintended. As Noetinger states, part of their art is “to show that the projector not only plays back the film, but it can be an instrument to act on directly. The image becomes just one part of it. It is like how I work with tape recorders. A tape recorder is meant to record music and play back in a certain way, but you can act on it in different ways. You can change its function to create something new. So, you can take something that is meant for a certain thing and play with it.” Noetinger often uses two tape recorders, one to play back pre-recorded sounds and the other to build loops using both the playback and recording heads simultaneously.

Noetinger feels that this attitude is also inherent in their use of the equipment itself, which they obtained at auction from the French Army when the army moved on to video. Their appropriation of these machines is opposite to the traditional idea of progress. “It is part of the idea of this French word *détournement* that you can still do things with old equipment that people maybe

threw away because it was not modern anymore.” Thus, elements indirectly used for war become part of artistic independence and creative use.

Even with many artists reusing cast-off equipment, Metamkine finds itself as one of the last groups to work with live 16mm film images and analogue music. Although it comes out of a tradition of expanded cinema and draws a lot of influence from groups that existed when it began (including Britain’s Loophole Cinema, which performed a lot with shadows, and Germany’s Schmelzdahin, which performed live chemical transformations on film), Metamkine is part of a dwindling pool of similar creators. A brief list of people still working in 16mm performance would include Alex Mackenzie in Vancouver, Bruce McClure and the duo The Presstapes (Luis Recoder and Sandra Gibson) in New York, Silt and Wetgate on the West Coast, and a handful of groups from other French microlabs.

Ironically, in this age of interactivity, laptop musicians have been the prime culprits in returning the visual element to the function of wallpaper. As Noetinger chuckles, “Nowadays it’s more and more common to see people playing on laptops, so they must have a video image. They’re afraid of things being empty, so they must fill it. The laptop is important, but you need to work with it more. You see performers who are on laptops and there is no image, but they still have to be onstage. Why do they have to be onstage? It’s still the classical bourgeois idea of representation.”

Noetinger continues, “After all, what is really important for me [is that] when I’m playing in this way, I’m really not making music for film. We’re not making film for music.” Watching a Metamkine performance

reveals the truth of that. With their devotion to improvisation and to creating each performance anew, Metamkine has broken the pattern in which music is in servitude to film or vice versa. To this end, they have never released an album or a DVD. Nor is there a sound example on this issue’s *Musicworks* CD—because they feel that the live experience is not replicable. Sound, image, and the audience’s response to the performance all intertwine.

Halfway through their performance at the Soundplay festival in Toronto, Quérel ran to the back of the hall and used a light to project shadows of the audience onto the screen. It was a strong visual image for Metamkine’s sense of event and sense of community. Noetinger summed up the importance of the spectator to the completion of the performance: “I think the connection is more the way it is meant together. It is very open; it is up to you to see the connections. The audience is completely free to make the connections themselves.” A performance by Metamkine thus invites the audience to discover anew the possibilities of exploring sound and image as a collaborative experience.

[Note: *La Cellule d’Intervention* Metamkine’s Web site is <<http://metamkine.free.fr/>>. Jérôme Noetinger’s Metamkine distribution organization is at <www.metamkine.com>.]

Chris Kennedy is a Toronto-based filmmaker, curator, and writer. His films, which are often shot on Super 8 or regular 8mm, have been shown in Switzerland, Finland, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. He has programmed film, video, and live performance for the *Images Festival* since 2003, and has served on the screening collective for *Pleasure Dome* since 2000. He regularly writes reviews for *Musicworks*.

résumé français

Depuis quinze ans, La Cellule d’Intervention Metamkine travaille à la fusion des mondes du cinéma et de la musique improvisée dans le cadre d’une expérience viscérale en direct. De plus, le trio composé de Jérôme Noetinger, Christopher Auger et Xavier Quérel a développé une infrastructure artistique à Grenoble au service des pratiques indépendantes et artisanales de la musique et du cinéma. À travers ces deux champs d’activité, ils ont poursuivi leur travail d’exploration et de promotion de la création dans les médias du film 16 mm et de la musique analogique. Cet article couvre leur travail artistique du point de vue de leur engagement dans la création et la promotion de nouvelles possibilités pour des pratiques artistiques mises à l’écart.