

**JULIUS EASTMAN
GAY
GUERRILLA
GIRLS**



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Performance of Julius Eastman's *Gay Guerrilla* (1979)
In collaboration with Maya Shenfeld

Arranged for 16 electric guitars by Dustin Hurt (1979/2017)

Disappearing Berlin
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Curated by Nina Pohl

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Text by Laura Preston

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ACUD Macht Neu, Noisy Rooms

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PERFORMING ARTISTS

Rossella Bottone, *guitar*

Greta Brinkman, *bass guitar*

Sky Deep, *guitar*

Klara Gustaffson, *bass guitar*

Tina Jäckel, *guitar*

Valerija Kravale, *guitar*

Flavia Messinese, *guitar*

Julia Reidy, *guitar*

Benita Rigo, *guitar*

Veslemøy Rustad Holsete, *bass guitar*

Alexa D!saster, *guitar*

Tabea Schrenk, *bass guitar*

Maya Shenfeld, *guitar*

Donya Solaimani, *guitar*

Eva Sterk, *guitar*

Lea Taragona, *guitar*

Metal, metal,
mettle and mantle

They play base like no other
—for M.

“I want to say a few words about the music ...” Julius Eastman first performed his composition *Gay Guerrilla* in the winter of January 1980 at Pick Staiger Concert Hall, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, just north of downtown Chicago. He played the piece that night along with others on four pianos; though he also states that it can be performed by any number of similar instruments, preferably strings. Throughout this somewhat minimalist, thirty-minute piece all players alternate in playing and thereby representing the major and minor chords of the musical tones. The score is an invitation for interpretation, which comes with a challenge: to improvise within the atonal, which is to say, to bring sensuality to the reduced and complicate the gender of the notes.

What may be happening in this work, what may soon occur tonight is an example of how music can be organized differently: the usual hierarchical order and stricture to complete an orchestral sound is no longer basis, but something else. That something else is what Eastman calls “organic music,” it builds on what has gone before. Or, “that is to say, the third part of any part or the third measure or the third section, the third part has to contain all of the information of the first two parts and then go on from there.” This understanding of accumulation as buildup and a continual rewriting is like the workings of history, of a city, a biography. Indeed, Eastman’s score features the historical tropes of the stirring chorale fantasia along

with the steady pulse of his contemporaneous minimalism. It slowly moves toward a citation of Martin Luther's hymn "Eine feste Burg ist unser Gott" (A Mighty Fortress Is Our God, 1527–29) only to collapse into being something else, again. Luther believed music was of God, not of Man. Eastman transfigured his anthem, Luther King style, for the "gay guerrilla." Pitch over pitch, curve over curve, dissonant and harmonic rhythms build and crossfade with different chords of the same length. They network a resounding strength before gently leaning into a C#. His music, his spirituality, was not without the queer and not without politics.

Prior to that premier north of Chicago, Eastman spoke before playing to address the "little problem" with the title of the piece: all three pieces performed that evening had created controversy as they may still today. *Gay Guerrilla* (1979) was joined by *Crazy Nigger* (1978) and *Nigger Faggot* (1978) that night at Northwestern. Intentionally provocative, Eastman was not just pointing to these terms but calling on their very real basicness to honor those who worked the fields, who founded the American economy. He wanted to find a ground for his music to proclaim his uneasy relationship to the nation-state built for capital gain and for exclusion—all that struggle and song.

There is a fundamental quality present in Eastman's music too, which has been described as minimalism infused with pop

influences and an eroticism of the dance floor—here translated to the chorale manifesto. These intersections of the experimental and the popular, the sensorial and the structural transports us back to New York City in the late 1970s: the city of artists was without such dependency on the market and it was just before the saturation of gentrification. Eastman moved within his city, inside and outside of the now very familiar records of art history of his time, when mediums were seriously cross-dressing, so to speak, dressing like priests, in leather and chains. He sang in Meredith Monk's otherworldly oratorio *Dolmen Music*, played keys with composer–electric cellist Arthur Russell, and had a major role in *Inside the Nuclear Power Station*, a futuristic opera by Peter Gordon with a libretto by the punk-feminist writer Kathy Acker—one way of naming who he touched.

There is a calling to the piece, that very basic quest for purpose too. "A guerrilla sacrifices life for a point of view, a cause," said Eastman, who named himself an instrumentalist-composer. Eastman also spoke of how names can glorify; in the case of "guerrilla," it glorifies "gay." There were not many gay guerrillas in 1980 he claimed in his introductory speech at Northwestern, but he used these words, his music, with the hope that one day they would speak through dark times. "That is the reason that I use 'gay guerrilla,' in hope that I might be one if called upon to be one." The coupling of Eastman's minimalism with the manifesto

chorale is almost militant in its sound; it speaks to the subject of violence, to the subjected, to us now. We are here in his future and calling on him. Soon a note will break, sharp, like light, all brilliant. Then another, and then the parts will enter, guerrillas with a cause, almost like a fugue. The dissonance will thicken, not easy, the harmony will build, not simple. A sense of suspension, and.

The manifesto that *Gay Guerrilla* aligns with another political speech from Eastman's era, specifically the words of Black Panther Party founder Huey P. Newton presented on August 15, 1970 under the title "The Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements." Newton was calling on the Panthers to "unite in revolutionary fashion" with "the various liberation movements among homosexuals and women" equally oppressed. Claiming this solidarity and requesting the end of misogyny and queer prejudice, particularly within black power politics. Newton that day famously took everyone, including the members of the party, by surprise.

Here, stands sixteen women gay guerrillas. If Eastman's composition was to cast light on inequality and discrimination, that basis, if it was a call for a cause to be uncompromising, that purpose, then artist Maya Shenfeld has taken up this provocation: she has gathered an ensemble of women on electric guitar and bass—she is Carrie Brownstein and Corin Tucker, she is Elizabeth Cotten, she is Gail Ann Dorsey, she is Peggy Lady Bo Jones, she is

Carole Kaye, she is Kim Gordon, she is Meshell Ndegeocello, she is Esperanza Spalding, she is Tina Weymouth, she is "who knew," coming to fill the stage. And as much as this is a reenactment or could be said to be part of the fervor of a market-incentive revival of Eastman, there is something else going on. Something that, I think, Eastman would have appreciated. A community is being strengthened and there is a queering occurring. Tonight's *Gay Guerrilla* uncomfortably shows just how unusual it is to see so many women in this position, and it is part of overcoming the debasing of women instrumentalists and, all the more so, women composers.

Shenfeld, who is leading this evening's double performance, similarly to Eastman, moves between the identities of composer-instrumentalist, exploring the intersections of sounds that extend from composing electroacoustic works, installations, and ensemble pieces to performing as a classical, experimental, and rock guitarist. Her recent projects have involved a collaboration with a children's choir for the Klangwerkstatt festival, an eight-channel sound installation commissioned by the Ethnologisches Museum, and *Five Compositions for the Environmental Song* with artist Richard Frater at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art; all composed and performed in Berlin and considerate of the displacement of recordings and quotations. Borders blur, there is reverb, there is delay and time stretching. Jerusalem is there too. In the spirit of

recognizing the recent past, she mobilizes music for the purpose of collective renewal—one way of naming who and what she has touched so far. Further, her particular choice of instruments to play Eastman’s *Gay Guerrilla* only amplifies the rallying qualities of the piece, for each player sounds her own way through the very literal amplification, which equally ensures a dissonant unison of “women” that alters the terms and offers a different glorification, this time of both “gay” and “guerrilla.”

Later in that year of 1980, Eastman performed *Gay Guerrilla*, but this time in our city of Berlin. The sounds that will again break through this night are staged in a building that has been deliberately left abandoned, passed from one set of real-estate investment hands to another, all in the name of capital and the (somewhat regulated) project of the city’s gentrification, which as artists we wittingly, unwittingly, augment, allowing the stratification of the city to appear and disappear. Organic music is based on the act of accumulation, but it shows another way of valuing this process: building on the past not to leave it haunting and empty, but to combine histories with bodies present. Indeed, music needs a body, a political base (or many basses) for spiritual communion. The basicness of the ground that Eastman called on and made art for is translated here tonight by women, seriously electric.

Laura Preston

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