

Balls

To

The Boem Boem rhythm machine sees Dutch artist **Philip Vermeulen** dancing with death

The

Wall



The Boem Boem is a physical rhythm machine powering its beats from two MIDI-controlled tennis ball cannons. It will be firing spheres of fluorescent yellow felt against the walls of Berlin's Berghain nightclub at 150 kilometres per hour throughout this year's CTM festival. "After a while," its Dutch born artist-inventor Philip Vermeulen claims, "it becomes funky."

It sounds like a potential death trap – and for one Austrian sound engineer, it nearly was. Back in September, deploying the Boem Boem at an installation at the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz, Vermeulen found himself exhausted by its gruelling schedule of early morning soundchecks. One such morning, an angry sound engineer from the venue next door rushed into the room, pissed off that his rehearsal time was being interrupted by the insistent thock-thock-thock of Vermeulen's balls banging against the adjoining wall.

Usually, he explains, "people see that it's dangerous, so they don't get close". But on this occasion, the irate engineer happened to run into the firing line during a gap in the composition. With Vermeulen and his team too tired to react, nobody warned him that things were just about to start flying. "So he got hit by the balls pretty hard," Vermeulen recalls, wincing. "But he survived. He said it was OK..."

Such incidents are meat to Vermeulen. The palpable sense of danger his machine inspires is a part of what attracts him to it, that "fight or flight response" kicking in for the visitor who then slowly, tentatively, has to learn to "trust the installation", as he puts it. "I find it interesting to have this contradiction," he continues, "where it's kind of dangerous but at the same time it's kind of attractive."

By way of influences, Vermeulen cites the "sublime" installations of Austrian artist Kurt Hentschlagler, which reveal a determination to "push entertainment to the max, to the point where it's not fun any more". But it's not just about entertainment through pain. For Vermeulen, the physically charged environment created by his Boem Boem machine is a means of breaking through the passivity of the audience and placing people in a state of high alert. The machine

itself becomes a puzzle to work through even as its infectious rhythms spur the body to movement.

One of the ways he's shifting the piece up a gear since Linz is through the use of strobes, shrouding the audience in darkness to begin with, then bringing in the flashing lights, timed in order to "freeze the moment it hits the sound box".

With Berghain being a so much bigger and more characterful venue than any place the Boem Boem has previously appeared, Vermeulen felt the need to find some way of wresting attention away from the building, "to bring the power back to the installation instead of the space itself". Just yesterday, he had a friend round who's a whizz with Max/MSP, "so we have been doing some small little tests".

The Boem Boem started life as Vermeulen's graduation project for the ArtScience Interfaculty housed between the Royal Academy of Art and the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague. It's the latest in his series of installations exploring what he calls "the visceral element of sound. I like installations which kind of blow you away, which smash your reasoning," he says.

But if it's the mind he sets out to alter, his starting point is always the body. In the beginning, there was rhythm – and for Vermeulen, the body in rhythm has long provided a path to the mind and language. Growing up in a small town in the northeastern Netherlands, the young Vermeulen had slightly delayed speech and language development. "I started talking a little bit late," he tells me, "so I couldn't really express myself – only by music." Without words, he danced. "I could have a lot of energy," he recalls, "so I guess music worked really well on me."

By the age of four, his parents bought him a drum kit to help him express himself. By 14, he was playing in punk bands, as well as what he describes as an "alcoholic orchestra". At the same time, he was proving himself to be a skilled field hockey player. He was the goalkeeper and eventually ended up tending goal for the regional youth team – "just underneath the national team", he says with pride. All was going

well "until the moment that I got afraid of the ball".

The was 2005. Vermeulen's team had acquired a machine to automatically shoot balls by way of testing the goalie's skills. "They were behind the machine, and they were just firing balls to me," he remembers with a shudder. "And of course they were as well aiming at my balls. I think at that moment, the fear kicked in." He never looked back.

The story of Vermeulen's encounter with the hockey ball machine contains an uncanny anticipation of his current project. Back then, he was still listening to gabba, punk, metal – "anything which had a lot of energy and anger in it," he says. But soon after, his tastes began to mature and grow calmer (he still loves the "immersive" qualities of gabba, what he calls its "weird funkiness laying around behind the corner"). In a sense, the Boem Boem combines the violence and energy of his youthful obsessions with the more avant garde interests of his later years, channelling all that visceral force into physically and psychologically compelling works of head-scratching intensity.

As a student, he went first to the Dutch film academy before switching to fine art. He quit for two years before discovering "by accident" the ArtScience Interfaculty. "They were doing just what I wanted to do," he says, "which is just experimenting and using different parameters to make compositions out of the weirdest things you can imagine."

Vermeulen continues to make compositions out of the weirdest things you can imagine, and 2018 is already shaping up to be a busy year for him. After CTM, the Boem Boem hits the road on a short tour before its creator takes up a residency in Arnhem. He has plans for a new installation "playing with the smallest amount of light you can see," as well as another machine involving high frequencies and stretched cloth, which he describes as "kind of a fuck machine". Here's hoping no one gets injured by that one. □ Philip Vermeulen's *Boem Boem* is at Berlin's Berghain until 2 February: see Out There. ctm-festival.de

Robert Barry