

Jamming in Traffic and Other Orchestrated Scenarios

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BRIGHTON, UK — Johanna Billing is an artist who orchestrates and films idealistic group activities which involve the viewer, but only up to a bittersweet point. She finds volunteers to make music, improvise dance, sail, move into their apartments, run wild in an Italian city, or amuse themselves in a staged traffic jam. In each case, the situations she establishes are part real, part contrived, and, when viewed from the sidelines, remote. They inspire a hopeless yearning, a thwarted humanistic feeling of hope. Billing, who is Swedish, said someone once compared the sensation of her work to *skavsår*, which in her mother tongue means the

chafing of a pair of new shoes. Billing herself appears to like this coinage; “*skavsår* of the soul!” she recalled with a laugh.

I spoke with Billing, via Skype, about her new film “Pulheim Jam Session,” which has been [screening at the High Line](#) in New York this summer. Pulheim is a conurbation of 12 villages, which the German government declared to be a town in the 1970s. Around the same time, jazz pianist [Keith Jarrett drove to Köln](#) to give a legendary improvised performance of his own. The Köln concert became the biggest selling solo jazz record of all time, and a key element in Billing’s film is a soundtrack of free jazz piano together with footage of pianist [Edda Magnason](#).

Most of the film, however, is concerned with the transient community of motorists and passengers who find themselves jammed between two built-up zones in Pulheim. The volunteers read, picnic, and walk their dogs, in apparent unawareness of Billing’s cameras. But we can be sure that these “performers” know what to do in a traffic jam like this — Pulheim has apparently the highest number of cars per household in Europe: [2.7 cars](#). That’s just a bit of backstory unearthed by the artist, for whom research gives her otherwise whimsical films resonance and depth.

Perhaps Billing’s interest in communal situations stems from her own upbringing. The artist grew up in Jönköping, a town which, thanks to its proliferation of churches, is known as the Swedish Jerusalem. She told me worship, baptisms, and speaking in tongues were the three most common pastimes when she was a child. “It was like a Mecca,” she said, “In my class ... 75% of the other kids would belong to some of these small churches.” The town had few restaurants, even fewer bars, and the local arts center was a rare place to hang out.



“We had a culture center, where we organized concerts and that was one of the things you could do which was not the church,” she recalled. “That became my community.” But before discovering the devil had the best tunes, Billing was as pious as any local child. “I wanted to sing in the choir,” she said of her early engagement with the local church scene. “When I was younger I wanted so much to be part of one of these churches or communities because they organized the fun things.”

The smaller churches were not as broad as you might imagine and the non-involvement of Billing’s family meant that she remained somewhat of an outsider. With one foot in the camp of community, one foot on the outside, Billing looks back at this time with a sense of revelation: “I think maybe all these

things that I work with, in groups, it probably has something to do with growing up in this city and always seeing this double side.” So while she acknowledges she comes off as “utopian,” the reality of her work is more ambivalent.

You might say it was music, rather than art, that gave Billing the sense of involvement she had missed out on. The artist worked as a music journalist while still at art school, to the mild horror of her tutors. Her enduring passion for music has led to work that, along with Jarrett’s improvisation, engages with compositions by Roky Erickson, Wildbirds & Peacedrums, Sidney Barnes, and Arthur Russell. In some cases, the musically trained artist will devise her own arrangements. And in all cases, the context of the chosen track will play well or contrast somehow with the context of her film. (It’s a footnote, but Billing was school friends with the Swedish indie band The Cardigans.)



“Being an artist still allows me to work with music,” she says, as she remembers the difficulty of choosing from a range of teenage interests, including history and architecture. A case in point is Billing’s film “Magical World” (2005), which quietly observes a music lesson at an after-school club in Zagreb. The children play and sing the eponymous track by Sidney Barnes. “At first glance, it’s such a trivial pop tune,” said the artist. But after further digging, the melancholic lyrics seem to speak to a new place and time as Croatia struggled to settle into the EU.

Given that she makes more or less short films which more or less build around a piece of music, it seemed worth asking if Billing grew up with MTV along with local evangelism. “You could see very little of it,” she says. “In the beginning maybe we didn’t even have MTV in Sweden ... or we had a Swedish version of it and you could only see that maybe one hour a week!” But having said that, she concludes that MTV and its regional imitators “must have influenced me a lot.” Indeed, it was a director of music videos who taught Billing to edit.



“Even if all those first works [such as ‘Project for a revolution’, ‘Missing out’ and ‘Where she is at’] didn’t have music, everything in the editing for me was still about rhythm,” said Billing. “There are so many rules for how you edit and so many traditions in film, but I never learned that.” Instead, Billing likens her works to rhythmic compositions: “Somehow it’s like making music, even if there is no music or even if it’s a video as a format.”

One doubts whether Billing could make a straight-up music video. Her films are about music, rather than set to music. The

music is a way into the idea, rather than the idea itself. In Pulheim, field recordings from car engines or car radios reassure you that you are watching a piece of art, as music bleeds into the broader category of sound design. But Billing does frame her subjects with melody or song. In all her films, music helps us to see how people share experience, acting as a visual aid and bonding agent, rather than auditory distraction.

