

The OPEN SPACE magazine

issue 17/18

spring 2015 / fall 2015

double issue

Ashley

by

Gutkin
Mailman
Marble
Epstein
Gann
Buckner
Feely/Just
Haskins
Holm-Hudson
Johnson
Oliveros
Siegel

Godard

by

Richardson

by

So

Asplund

Sabat

Pisaro

Vitkova

Barkin

by Robison

Kelly by Quasha

Sharp

by Matthusen

Monk by Siegel

Wolff

Randall

by friends, family, colleagues

ASL

by Polansky

Quasha & Stein
by Panitz

Galas by

Gottschalk/Mylonas

Moussorgsky

by Corner

Texts by Watier, Panitz, So, Rivadeneira, Branchi, Upjohn

The OPEN SPACE magazine

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*texts in memory of Robert Ashley (1930-2014)

the editors also note with sorrow the deaths of Jack Body, Steven Gerber, Ornette Coleman and Gunther Schuller. texts on their work will appear in future issues of *The Open Space Magazine*.

Sound files and other accompanying materials to the articles in The Open Space Magazine may be accessed at www.the-open-space.org/downloads/

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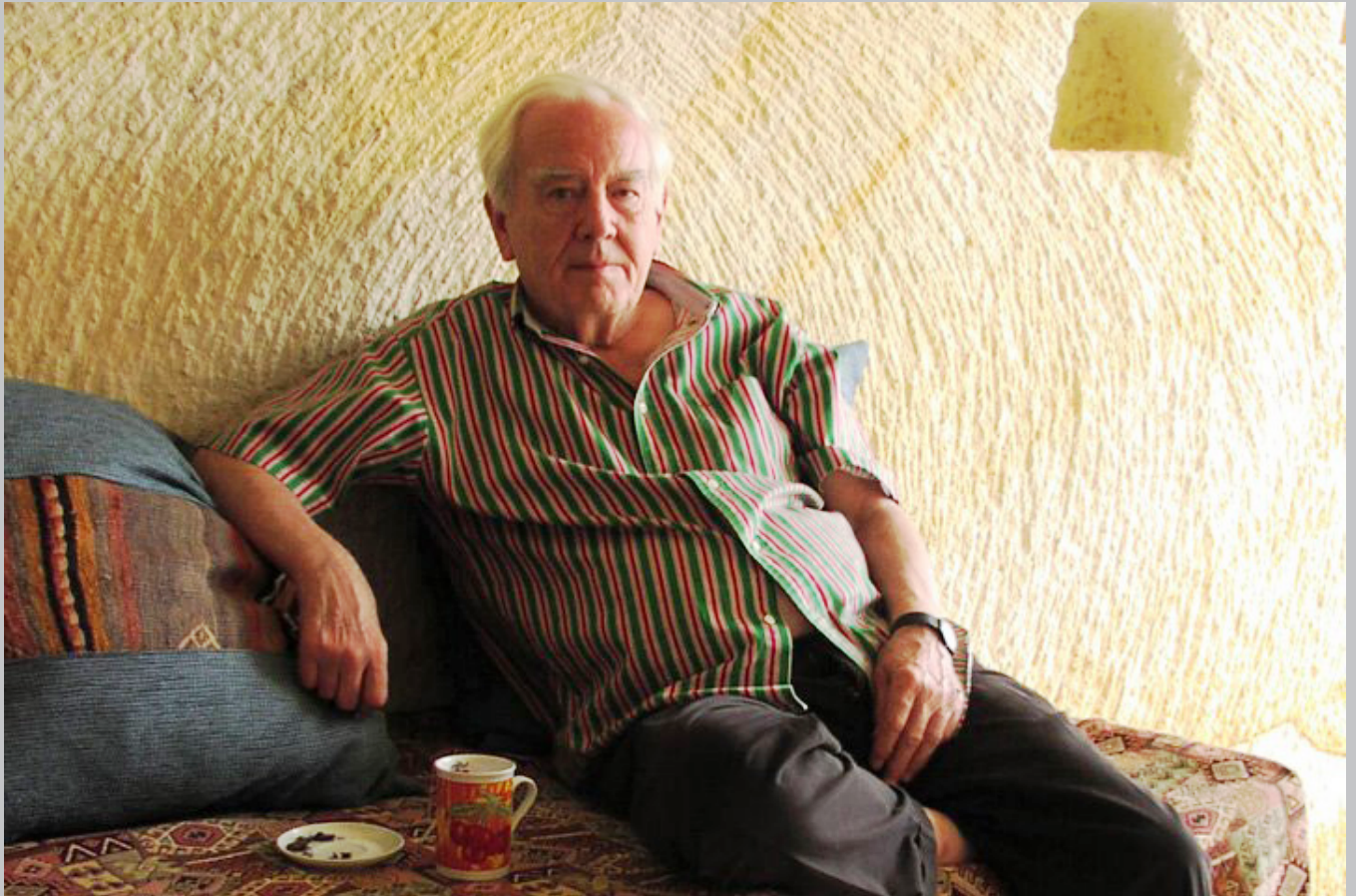
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Robert Ashley
1930-2014

Eric Watier

“The easier it is, the more beautiful it is.”

(Introduction to the most beautiful exhibition in the world)¹

Filling a room with old, worn out tires and letting the public do as they see fit is easy.
Allan Kaprow did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Covering the floor of a hallway with wooden blocks of different sizes is easy.
Ay-O did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Drawing a straight line and following it is easy.
La Monte Young did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Writing the word EXIT is easy.
George Brecht did it and now everyone else can do the same.

¹ Eric Watier's full text will be published in book form, in French, during Fall 2015 by ÉDITIONS INCERTAIN SENS, Rennes (<http://www.incertain-sens.org>)

"The easier it is, the more beautiful it is"

Scattering twenty thousand spent bullet casings on the floor is easy.
Matias Faldbakken did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Standing on a plinth and sticking your tongue out for a minute is easy.
Erwin Wurm did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Making a straight line of 137 bricks along the floor, the first being wedged against the foot of the wall, is easy.
Carl Andre did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Pouring a cup of sea water on the floor is easy.
Lawrence Weiner did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Putting two projectors facing and shining them at each other is easy.
Ange Leccia did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Gluing a little red sock in a wooden box is easy.
Robert Filliou did it well, badly, not-at-all, and now everyone else can do the same (well, badly, or not-at-all).

Following the edge of a wall (four inches from the edge) with black graphite and a ruler is easy.
Blinky Palermo did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Godard

three dice stars *

stories of

farewell to language

film socialisme

his many storeyed

my tongue, fare thee well

art

dog

cinéma

When you hear a famously beloved uncle slandered, what do you think? what do you do? I read that phrase, which I had surely half-thought before, in the early 2000s, printed in a right-wing French newspaper, “*Est-ce que le Tonton Jeannot ¹ est une fraude?*”

Can someone whose work has captivated you for 60 years due to its originality, freshness, idiosyncracies, moments of rapture and sheer verve be held to be a fraud² in any sense? What does that mean?

It means that a link between generations has been lost but by a certain *recirculation* the same different questions and (faux) outrages provoked by a series of works in the late 50s and early 60s were being re-

¹ *Tonton Jeannot (Uncle Johnny) is the name affectionately and indulgently applied to the famous curmudgeon Jean-Luc Godard by a large section of the left wing press in France.*

² *I have not been able to discover this actual source, which I (mis?)remember as France Soir, le Figaro or even perhaps Ouest France, from around 2003?? But I need not have worried – if you enter ‘Godard + fraud’ into Google, you will find hundreds of articles and comments. How very odd.*

posed under different terms in a different world in the late-early/early-mid 21st century.

Is the Emperor flouting the rules of grammar or does he not in fact know what those rules are? does he not know that when you backlight a subject against snow, you will only see a silhouette? or that shooting into the sun produces lens flare? or that using slow film in a dark interior will result in no image at all?

... that mixing and abruptly cutting sound levels is annoying? that glimpses of naked actors can be variously distracting, frustrating, politically incorrect, voyeuristic or just plain wrong? why are Godard’s men characterful, leaning on the side of ruggedness or even, for want of a better term, ugly? while his women characters and actual faces, bodies, are young, luminous, generous and vulnerable? is lingering on the one the same as lingering on the other?

Rolle – Beauviala – Aaton – free TGV tickets to Grenoble to see what all the

fuss is about. Godard says, in an offhand promo: *it's still too noisy*. We thought it was supposed to be light, compact and quiet. *Light and silent*. Light and very quiet. *Silent*. The quietest.

“ / ”
.

The camera, you understand, not the train.

Godard now uses video (Aaton now make videocameras, too). Godard moves into 3D by using two high-end Canon consumer photo cameras, held in place by handmade woodblocks, clamps from the Swiss equivalent of Home Depot, and a couple of rubber bands. The rail system to permit very smooth, slow, sideways movements (which emphasize depth) are a couple of children's toy wide-gauge traintrack sections, and one flatbed railcar. Truly. To set the two lenses the required distance apart, one of the cameras must be mounted upside down. There are four technicians involved in the fabrication and shooting crew for this rig. In some scenes, the entire crew is just Jean-Luc Godard; the entire cast, just his dog, *Roxie*. Their dog, *Roxie Mieville*.

Sonimage, the brandname for Godard and Anne Mieville's production company, is a basement in Rolle, on Lake Geneva / Lac Léman / Genfersee. Languages. Monitors, title generators, more akin to a mediaeval guild printshop than a cutting edge technological factory. (Aaton, by the way, make a small sound mixer whose principle feature is that everything is controlled by its own dedicated physical knob or slider. No menus. *Prix fixe*.)

What is 3D? an illusion of depth created by slightly different images reaching your two eyes. Yes. [I just overtyped an error in the text: I wrote, “an illusion of deth”. Perhaps.]

But also – at least – parallax as revealed by micro-movements of the camera, objects moving in relation to each other in the visual field; also the relative size of known objects such as pencils, cups, books. Bodies. Faces. Dogs. Dogs' faces; that things nearer obscure things further away (*un train peut cacher un autre*); or staging in depth, so beloved of Orson Welles, for which one does not even need a camera, only bodies and a space. None of these things require two lenses. Or special glasses.

Godard's 3D films are made using the patent Dolby system (expanding from their ubiquitous noise reduction system) which uses two alternating image sequences at 48 frames per second to give the viewer two sets of nearly identical³ images, one to each eye, at the normal rate of 24 images per second (or Truth, *dixit* Godard, from another lifetime, that older place that we still call 'New', though also 'vague'). Pale, coloured filters ensure that each eye only receives one of these images, meaning special glasses need to be worn. But why bother? According to an interview given to a journalist in a 'making of' for Canon: because there are no rules yet in 3D. Nothing that you must do. No mountain of *shoulds*. The use of 3D then – as with video saying farewell to film, to celluloid is just one in a series of long goodbyes (though celluloid had been bidden farewell many times before, an endless and continuous sequence of leavetakings since the late 19th century,

³ at two points in the film, Godard breaks this 'unstated rule'.

in other words, since cinema's beginning).

Histoire(s) de cinéma. A decade's work, innocent of copyright, Godard's eye for the quote, for correspondence, for a heterogenous field of study, of dream, of pleasure. Image and text, overlays, the word, the deconstructed fragment, the shock of the new juxtaposition, the reframing of the fragments. History. Stories. The great narratives. Essentially, for Godard, whatever the surface of his films – and that is not to say they are superficial – Cinema and History both Fell or lost the possibility of redemption, at the same hurdle, that of the Holocaust, of representation, of the possibility of redemption, of the one possibility – to show

that
there
then

having been lost, missed, avoided. No way to turn the clock back.

Or is that what film does, is? *Film Socialisme*, the microcosm of a luxury Mediterranean cruise, the Babel-ship with its casinos, sumptuous meals at the captain's table, breathtaking views... all the usual ad copy... and the romances or sexual trysts attempted, made, broken. Dashes of celebrity. The garish. As the vessel inexorably heads for Palestine, the Levant. The simple words spoil the holiday. Godard himself spanked by the PC⁴ press for even raising the question, speaking the name. Can you turn the clock back? For

⁴ as in 'Politically Correct', not the French 'Parti Communiste'.

Socialism? For Palestine (For Israel?). And if time were to run backward... the ship would leave the Levant and all its painful questions and images and sail back into a plentiful world of consumption. Innocent consumption, because prelapsarian, and innocent of its own onrushing origin.

Yet the fact remains that the actual ship inhabited by the film – the *Costa Concordia* – gained its own notoriety the year after Godard's film was completed, by being carelessly driven onto a reef, capsizing, and causing 32 deaths.

But that film was resolutely flat. In 2D as far as any image can be in 2D.

Goodbye To Language, however, is anything but flat. The main effect (if it can be called an effect) of Godard's quiet use of 3D is to give very simple scenes a sense of volume, of the concrete and the tactile. His rooms, his furniture and the bodies that move through these spaces have a soft solidity, a basic sensuality, a touchability, that standard film – and particularly regular HD video – singularly lack. Apart from the physical wrench at those two points in the film where Godard moves just one of the cameras, forcing your eyes to (try to) make two simultaneous (impossible) movements. A couple, static in a dimly lit room are having a dispute. Familiar Godardian territory. Takes a couple to have a dispute. The man storms off to the window; the woman remains seated. We simply cannot look at this scene. Our eyes don't do that. The volume of the room has been ruptured, rendered into two flat images. A man. A woman. Alone in two close but separate flat worlds. Then the camera pans back, the images reunite, the room reassumes depth. And it's a delicate gesture.

Moving just one of a pair of 3D cameras is easy.

Jean-Luc Godard did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Harriet Andersen turning to stare into the camera at the end of Bergman's 'Monika'.

One of those moments.

Roxie looks at the camera quite a lot. But Roxie doesn't smoke. The couple come and go. Yes. But, as I read on a wall in Belleville, many years ago, 'the love of a dog is eternal'.

Yes, but does Godard know what he is doing? **Is the emperor wearing any clothes?**

Godard's recent works post Histoire(s) have become more sombre – older - as their underpinnings in the losses and evasions of Godard's century reveal themselves as more and more dogged, refusing to let Godard a moment's respite. Or Godard manages to not give the problems a moment of their own respite. The possible / impossible relationship between a man and a woman; the perhaps unanswerable but at any rate consistently unanswered question of the responsibility for the Holocaust and its ongoing scars; the ineffable beauty of the world, anyway.

Trois Désastres - a short film made as part of a triptych (like they used to do in the good old days of 'RoGoPaG') functions as a kind of secret making of and lead-in to *Adieu au Langage*. Both were shot simultaneously. Both were shot in 3D, both dip into the same library of ingredients that Godard and his cinematographer, Fabrice Aragno, gathered and assembled. Secrets are disclosed.

A couple of things here: why the translation of that title troubles me so; and a word about Godard's notorious (that word again) use of puns. Godard is a highly linguistically alert filmmaker, by which I mean, he literally embeds language, its quirks and twists, and its structural elements, inside the structures of his audio-visual works. But, as can be seen from video interviews with the man, he uses puns and wordplay to undercut his own (perceived) over-seriousness. The loftiest statements will be toppled by his own bathetic or vulgar pun. Lame, perhaps. A self-hobbling, and quite endearing. I do not believe that Godard is seriously trying to impress us with some of his cutting into words and their etyms; he's being playful. It's the same with his quotes: he's not passing himself off as erudite, he's letting us know he's only really read the jackets of the paperbacks, too. Or of some of them. The short film opens, then repeatedly returns to three dice⁵ being thrown. You can amuse yourself by working out what numbers are being hazarded. And the stars?

And so to the title – which hardly needs translating, as we all know the word *Adieu*. But 'goodbye' just seems wrong. Too flat. (Too final?) And who is leaving, anyway? Is Godard leaving language? or is language leaving Godard (behind). Godard is 85. But mainly there is this: *Adieu au Langage* is not a depressing, tired, world-weary or down-at-heart film. It plays with a relatively new medium in an inventive, light-handed and joyful way. Not the End of Language in that sense, nor yet of a certain (cinematic) language, but of the transition between two modes

⁵ Godard cuts the title *Trois désastres* – three disasters - into a new phrase with a different meaning: *trois dés astres* – three dice stars.

of telling, two ways of showing, always linked to Godard's always vital way of *seeing*. The camera (probably as a focus test) scans the sky at dusk, jittery movements finally settling on a cloud formation. This random beauty goes into the film; sections of the film, shot on cheap video cameras, blast garish colours (as on the cruise ship) all poster yellows and blues, or as seen by Bonnard; autumn leaves as freshly seen by a six year old infant (or an animal); trees after the rain; children on a psychedelically green lawn; a woman's breast; a Swiss village square; (a

fragment of) a painted sign. All fresh. Deep. Touching. Light on light.

So, *Adieu* seems inappropriate, too final, ungenerous, somehow, and I'd rather use the Celtic mood of faring or travelling well, with its implications of a continued journey that – sadly – we will not be taking together, neither you nor I, and not Godard or Language, or Jean-Luc and cinéma, at least, not for the moment, and not for ever. The language(s) will continue, that much is certain, and so, it is a good thing to hope that they will meet good fortune along the (future) way, and thus: ***Farewell***.

Les Trois Désastres

<https://vimeo.com/114621257>

Interviews with Godard about 3D

http://cpn.canon-europe.com/content/Jean-Luc_Godard.do

“Meanwhile, Let’s Go Back in Time”:

Allegory, Actuality, and History in Robert Ashley’s Television Opera Trilogy

David Gutkin

Why is it that the furthest reaching truths
about ourselves and the world have to be
stated in such a lopsided, referentially indirect
mode?

-Paul de Man, “Pascal’s Allegory of Persuasion”

When you hear people talk about metonymy,
metaphor, allegory, and other such names in
grammar, doesn’t it seem that they mean some
rare and exotic form of language? They are the
terms that apply to the babble of your cham-
bermaid.

- Montaigne, *Essays*

Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, composers of opera have had to contend with countless pronouncements that theirs was a dying or dead form, increasingly irrelevant to the contemporary historical moment. Perhaps the critics were right. It would not be much of an exaggeration to say that by midcentury opera had become a cipher for “the historical” itself in a period in which the theoretical and artistic vanguard was relentlessly critiquing historical thought on multiple fronts: in the legacy of New Critical literary theory, in structuralist semiotics and anthropology, and, notably, in late modernist and avant-garde aesthetics.¹ Tellingly, in 1967 Pierre Boulez famously repudiated what he saw as the musical establishment’s pathological attachment to tradition by calling for all opera houses to be “blown up.”² That the Frankfurt Opera House, where *Europerras 1 & 2* by his onetime friend John Cage were to be premiered in 1987, was actually burned down by an arsonist two weeks before the performance, and that Cage expressed his qualified sympathy for the man’s act, are mere felicitous details in the story of opera’s death.³

Forged from bits and pieces of over 100 operas drawn from the standard repertory and arranged by chance procedures, carried out with the aid of a computer, the *Europerras* themselves might be taken as a sign of the transition from an anxiety-ridden modernism that would negate history to an irreverent postmodernism that would playfully cannibalize

historical forms in the confidence that they belonged to a world irrevocably past.⁴ Cage's title, which can be read as "your operas," indicates the pronounced national dimension in this narrative of the joint demise of opera and history.⁵ (Cage wrote, "For two hundred years the Europeans have been sending us their operas. Now I'm sending them back.") Indeed, as a grandly ludic summation of the triumvirate Opera-Europe-History, the *Europeras* would appear an ideal symbol of the alleged eclipse of historical consciousness in the "American century" that writers on both the neoliberal right and the theoretical left were proclaiming during the 1980s.⁶

Myopic or tendentious as some of the strong theses on the "end of History" may have been, the perception that recent decades have been marked by a kind of ongoing crisis in historical representation is hardly groundless.⁷ Manifestations of such a crisis, however, were surely more ambiguous or contradictory than the parable above would suggest. Was the end of opera, for example, so clear? In fact, at the time Cage was writing his *Europeras*, American opera was in the midst of what many critics had decided was a "rebirth," beginning sometime in the 1970s and flowering in the 1980s and early 1990s.⁸ Although a wealth of numbers can be mustered in support of this conclusion, it would be hard to characterize the eclectic operatic activity of these years as the manifestation of a coherent impetus.⁹ While Philip Glass and Robert Wilson's minimalist monument *Einstein on the Beach* from 1976 has often been cited as the fount of the purported opera renaissance, the most prominent new American operas of the 1980s and early 1990s, including Glass' own subsequent work, seem traditional by comparison. In retrospect, at least two overlapping phases of the operatic renewal might be discerned. A spate of innovative music-theatrical and operatic works from the 1970s through the mid-1980s by musicians including Meredith Monk, Carla Bley, Julius Hemphill, Laurie Anderson, Wadada Leo Smith, and Glass appears to have been the avant-garde prelude to a more conservative tide shift.¹⁰ Anthony Davis' *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (1986), John Adams' *Nixon in China* (1987), and Stewart Wallace's *Milk* (1995) might be named as exemplars of a "new school" of neo-grand opera: although each has novel elements, all were written for mostly standard operatic forces with operatic voices; all fall into a narrative tradition of mimetic theater; and all were produced by major opera houses.

These key neo-grand operas do not appear to be parodies of the operatic tradition in the vein of Cage's *Europeras* but rather, if their engagement with recent historical subject matter is any indication, earnest attempts to turn that tradition toward "relevant," contemporary ends. Perhaps it is telling that Adams rejected the tendency of critics to interpret *Nixon in China* as a piece of self-consciously kitschy Pop art, and preferred to frame the origins of his mature work through a story about a memorable encounter with Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*.¹¹ Indeed, the resurgence of American opera reflects one of the deeper antinomies of that notoriously vexed concept, "postmodernism": the many concerted turns to the past in the arts since the 1970s were as apt to betray a pronounced nostalgia and desire to re-forge links with traditions that the supposedly excessive aberrations of modernism had severed as they were to evince the affirmative sense of historical (or ahistorical) exteriority implicit in the currency of terminology like "appropriation." Nor was historical reclamation the exclusive province of a neoconservative traditionalism, a cultural complement to Reagan-Thatcher era politics; the subject matter of Davis' operas, for example—Malcolm X, the Amistad trial (*Amistad*), the Standing Bear trial (*Wakonda's Dream*)—reflects a legacy of progressive historicism, stemming from the feminist, civil rights, Black Power, and anticolonial movements

of the 1960s that sought to recover histories of the dominated and marginalized. Thus in Davis' work the putatively "conservative" and "radical" intersect in a complicated manner: his operatic gambit—the decision to cloak his syncretic compositional style drawn from experimental jazz, Balinese gamelan music, Stravinskian neotonality, minimalism, and the works of Ellington and Mingus in quasi-traditional operatic garb, indeed his adamant insistence that he was composing "real opera"¹²—no doubt reflects his stated affinity for Janáček, Berg, and, again, Wagner, but it also bespeaks an attempt to take the struggle over history into the symbolic heart of an exclusionary, elitist white culture.

But the tenacity of both conservative and progressive investments in versions of tradition and history in recent decades, itself bound up with the advent of a broader musealizing turn in culture, does not thereby mean that all was well with historical thought—or with opera.¹³ It is notable that works such as *Nixon in China*, *Milk*, and Davis' *Tania* (about Patty Hearst), not only draw on recent political history but play upon its televisual mediation in apparent bids for contemporaneity. (Critic Peter G. Davis coined the somewhat derisive phrase "CNN opera" to describe this trend.) Here we see a variation on the antinomy of the postmodern sketched above: on one hand, cultural production since the 1970s reflects a groping after traditional vehicles of experience (grand opera, the realist novel, figurative painting); on the other hand, it displays a fascination with the pervasive technological mediation that has so deeply impacted the contemporary experience of time and space—a fascination, in other words, with the technologies that are perhaps the most obvious source of the recent crises in historical representation. The neo-grand operas of the 1980s and early 1990s seem like attempts to turn this tension toward a kind of double redemption: by redeeming the historical form of opera—the symbol of the historical—through contemporary subject matter and media, the present should be imbued with the dimension of history that it is apparently denied under the conditions of postmodernity.¹⁴ But is a modified form of grand opera adequate to the task of speaking in and about the present? And, to paraphrase Frederic Jameson, is there any way for us—through opera or otherwise—to even think about the present historically?¹⁵

Enter Robert Ashley, whose trilogy of television operas composed between 1977 and 1994 is the hugely ambitious expression of the composer's emphatic "No!" to the question of grand opera's adequacy. Ashley wrote that, although he is generally loath to criticize other composers, he has nevertheless "railed at" his contemporaries for writing operas about "famous 'issues,'" "great cultural moments," politicians, and celebrities. His own works, often derived from personal experiences or stories told to him by friends, reflect his stated preference for opera that concerns the lives of "'ordinary' people."¹⁶ Accompanying his aversion to the subject matter of much American opera was Ashley's dissatisfaction with its fundamental techniques of representation, which, he argued, are predicated on a composer-centric mode of composition that "restricts the composer to speaking about the past only." He wrote:

[In *Perfect Lives*] I haven't composed melodies or harmonies or entrances or orchestration, because I have found the approach difficult precisely in the area of storytelling or "opera" in that the product of that approach is archetypically a revisionist history, rooted in memory and prejudice, and restricts the composer to speaking about the past only (or, apparently so, considering the contemporary repertoire). The idea of storytelling modeled on the technology of the electronic media, a gathering of actualities, seems more relevant, bypassing the past, and interesting to me. The techniques of the traditional role for the composer seem to me inextricably involved in maintaining the past as a field of understanding, that is, "modernism." I find the idea of a single vision, the idea of the "auteur," incompatible with the demands of maintaining a mode of actuality.¹⁷

Indeed, Ashley became convinced in the mid-1970s that opera's future lay in television.¹⁸ But unlike those composers who sought to imbricate the televisual with dramatic and musical principles drawn from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century forms of opera, he saw in television a medium that demanded a fundamental overhaul of operatic procedures and compositional technique. First and foremost, Ashley argued, this is because television breaks with the centuries-old grip of "representation." What is the non-representational, televisual modality Ashley wished to achieve in his opera? What did he mean by those mysterious phrases: "a gathering of actualities"; "a mode of actuality"?

Of course, Ashley was far from alone among practitioners of twentieth-century theater in disavowing representation. Nor will his invocation of "actualities" sound entirely foreign to anyone familiar with the various turns in the expanded field of theater since the 1950s against naturalism, illusionism, or narrative, and toward new forms of performative immanence. "Actualities," for example, might bring to mind director and performance theorist Richard Schechner's approximately contemporaneous discussion of "actuals." Schechner uses the term (borrowed from Allan Kaprow) to designate an alternative to the paradigm of mimetic representation, which, he claims, implies a temporal ideology that constitutes the very basis of Western art. "The root idea of mimesis," he writes, is that "[art] always 'comes after' experience," adding that "the separation of art and life is built into the idea of mimesis."¹⁹ Against this mimetic practice, "an 'actual,'" for Schechner, is art understood not as imitation or representation but as the event itself. Similarly, Ashley distinguished a "mode of actuality" from the field of representation in respect to temporality. The "gathering of actualities" is opposed to "revisionist history," to "memory"—it should even "bypass the past" itself. And if television is the model for this conception of storytelling, this is because television—although notably mediated—is nevertheless for Ashley the paradigmatic medium of "real time." That, he wrote, is its "greatness."²⁰

But in Ashley's trilogy, not only is the past not bypassed, it seems to crop-up everywhere, in microcosmic and macrocosmic magnitudes. Like an American Proust—a complement the composer once paid poet and novelist Keith Waldrop—Ashley probed the processes of memory as one of his thematic obsessions. (Giordano Bruno, the sixteenth-century philosopher of occult memory techniques, is a recurring figure in the cycle.) Fragments from his own life are strewn throughout the libretti—references to childhood neighbors, family tales, and overheard anecdotes. Perhaps these fragile bits of personal memory are easy enough to reconcile with Ashley's rejection of "great cultural moments" and "revisionist history," but what are we to make of the grand historical narrative imputed to the operas by none other than the composer? The entire cycle forms, in Ashley's words, "a kind of history of America," a multitiered epic depicting the "movement of American 'consciousness' across the continent."²¹

Ashley explained the historical dimension of the trilogy in the language of allegory, in fact, as an allegory of language: the shifts that the American consciousness undergoes in the course of migration are signified by the use of different storytelling forms. *Atalanta (Acts of God)* exemplifies the "anecdote," formally corresponding to the stories of the "Old World" told by newly arrived immigrants on the east coast; in *Perfect Lives* anecdote has splintered into "sayings," which point to the onset of New World amnesia in the great plains of the Midwest; finally, the four operas that jointly form the third installment of the trilogy—the *Now Eleanor's Idea* tetralogy: *Improvement (Don Leave Linda)*, *eL/Aficionado*, *Foreign Experiences*,

and *Now Eleanor's Idea*—consist of an atomized form of speech that depicts the linguistic consciousness of the West coast, where names, severed from original meanings, wait to be synthesized into a new American language.²²

But would not the rejection of “representation” *especially* preclude allegory? Although the allegorical is often distinguished from the mimetic, surely it is a representational mode. Indeed, in the course of the twentieth century allegory underwent a remarkable rehabilitation and became, in the eyes of many critics contemporary with Ashley, the paradigm of all representation: one thing that stands for another in a relationship of arbitrariness and supplementarity.²³ What could be more opposed to the implicit presentness of “actuality” than allegorical substitution? And isn’t the concept of representation as a pointing to meanings that are not made manifestly “present” intimately tied to an idea of the past? Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht suggests that the Reformation’s reconceptualization of the ritual of the Eucharist as an allegorical representation rather than actual presentation of substance opened up a sense of temporal and spatial distance that was concomitant with the emergence of historicity itself.²⁴ Walter Benjamin, who set the modern revaluation of allegory in motion with *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, conceived of the allegorist’s activity as a radical intervention (later described as a “tiger’s leap”) into the past through the projection of new meanings onto the dessicated “body” of signs and images that time had drained of whatever significance they once illusorily bore.²⁵ How, then, do actuality and allegory confront each other in Ashley’s operas, and what “kind of history” does this yield? These are the central questions I seek to unfold in this article.

As a clue to the trajectory of my argument, I should note that a transition from an allegorical technique to a kind of magical process of actualization might be taken as the theme of a book that arguably exerted a greater influence on Ashley’s trilogy than any other single work: Frances Yates’s 1966 classic, *The Art of Memory*. Yates’s thesis concerns the historical transformation of “memory techniques” from the secular, mnemonic systems of Antiquity to the occult use of “seals” by Giordano Bruno and other masters of Renaissance magic. The former could be viewed as an exemplary instance of allegory—a mechanistic encoding process in which one thing arbitrarily stands for another—and the latter as the Neoplatonist forerunner to that traditional antithesis of allegory, the Romantic “symbol,” in which signifier and signified form an instantaneous, mystical totality.²⁶ Indeed, Ashley’s dual fascination with codes and encryption, on one hand, and with Neoplatonist similitudes, on the other, is readily apparent throughout the trilogy. Thus, after first dissecting the eminently secular semiotic self-reflexivity in Ashley’s work, my analysis will have to eventually countenance the possibility of an underlying magical hermeneutics.

The Art of Memory might first provide a hint about how to begin. Yates places particular emphasis upon memory as a practice or performance. Likewise, if memory is a central theme of Ashley’s trilogy, it is memory in its declarative phase,²⁷ as the verbal performance of storytelling or song, that constitutes the reflexive object of Ashley’s allegory. My first step, then, is to discern how the vehicle of “performance” becomes its own reference. I approach this question in the first section through an examination of the process by which an unusual type of character—what I will call a “performer-character”—comes into being. In the following section (“It Was a Boring Idea Anyway”), I turn to the structure of the stories that these performer-characters both tell and exist within. Here I interpret the exceedingly complex narrative scheme of Ashley’s trilogy as a kind of allegorical riddle about time. But while this

riddle, as I formulate it, ultimately demands that we reflect on our temporal experience of sound, the dominant tradition of allegorical theory has always subordinated the sensory and the experiential to the meaningful. This distinction is especially inadequate to help interpret a body of work in which an entrancing, bewildering, almost uninterrupted flow of rapidly-delivered words hovering between speech and song simultaneously foregrounds and obstructs linguistic meaning, a dialectic that is, moreover, thematized in the characters' often muddled exegeses on the relation between the sonorous and semantic. Thus, rather than capitulate to the division between the sensuous and the meaningful, in the third section ("A Long Whining Sound"), I argue that language becomes self-allegorizing in Ashley's operas in a distinctly experiential modality, namely, in the perception of a comic battle between meaning and sound lodged within the voiced word. In the final section, "The Assault of the Present on the Rest of Time," I attempt to draw together the figure of the performer-character from the first section, the thematics of time from the second, and the sonic-semantic interplay from the third in order to interpret the allegory of storytelling upon which the cycle's message about history and the present depends.

An additional word: to this day, and much to the composer's chagrin, *Perfect Lives* is the only one of Ashley's operas that was produced in full and broadcast as a television work. Thus, despite my emphasis on the importance of television for Ashley's work, my argument almost entirely concerns sound and text so that I might coherently interpret the cycle as a whole.

I – The Performer-Character

"A group of so-called fictitious characters
is just as bad as a group of so-called real ones."
--Robert Ashley, *Celestial Excursions*

In an interview Ashley conducted with Morton Feldman in 1963, Feldman observes, with some remorse, that although the project of indeterminate composition that he and Cage spearheaded in the early 1950s had been intended to free sound as an end in itself, it had been misunderstood and instead "emancipated the musician, the performer." Ashley says that the "inheritance" of this misunderstanding can be seen in a tendency toward "real 'image making,'" an "imagery of personality" in the work of younger experimental American composers.²⁸ Around the same time, Ashley was developing a form of collaborative opera with the ONCE Group that was meant to foreground the "real" personality of the performers. Retrospectively describing this work, he wrote, "Certainly the idea of making music with 'characters' started with my work with the ONCE Group. It was a peculiar beginning in that I was not working with 'opera singers.' I was working with real people, who had real character. For some instinctive reason I never, for a moment, asked any of them to be someone other than who they were. They were simply friends doing musical things. It didn't take us long to realize that this was an unusual approach to 'opera.'" ²⁹

Elsewhere, Ashley named the great midcentury jazz bands, Duke Ellington's in particular, as his model. "In big-band jazz," he wrote, "there were these characters in the band, and people would go to see the bands in order to follow those characters. I've always regarded those bands as proto-operas, and very American in form."³⁰ Although Ashley freely plays with

multiple valences of the term “character,” it is hard to imagine how his conception of opera as “a kind of documentary of character”³¹ rooted in the personality of real people eventually led to an immense allegorical cycle populated by a cast of apparently illusory or fictive beings. In other words, my initial dichotomy of actuality and allegory might be further bifurcated: actuality is set against the representation of the past, but it would also appear inimical to the representation of the imaginary. To begin unraveling these oppositions, we might first ask just what kind of “character” we are dealing with.

The distinct type of character encountered in the trilogy gradually emerges from a unique method of improvisatory speech composition that Ashley would call the “template” approach. He first employed the term in reference to his piece *Automatic Writing* (1975-79), a recording that documents a forty-eight minute “performance” of his own involuntary speech. In a 1979 radio interview Ashley said, “It [the “template” idea] comes from the period of the record *Automatic Writing* when I recognized that there were certain kinds of phrases that I said to myself. I actually repeated them. They cycled themselves in my *immediate* consciousness; they weren’t even subconscious. They were pretty much there all the time.” There were four of these phrases, each with four syllables: “fuckin’ clever,” “the Varispeed,” “I wanted to,” and “you guys are all . . .” Ashley seems to have chosen the term “template” because in each phrase he discerned a melodic and rhythmic profile that he could tap into and use as a framework to speak *in*, the way, he explained, a musician “might use a [harmonic or melodic] mode.”³² *Automatic Writing*, he continued, was an “attempt on my part to ‘produce’ that character on tape. I wanted to produce the character that was using those templates on tape.” So the composer identifies an unintentional activity in his mind, a propensity to hear or say certain phrases. Like a composer should, he investigates their musical content. Things get a little weird: from this content he derives a template that he can “use” by isolating the original, unintentional impulse and regarding it as a separate “character.” Clearly, this sonic manifestation is not a fictive character in any ordinary sense, but the next compositional step in the production of *Automatic Writing* does at least suggest the invention of an imaginary “world.” Ashley created three additional “characters”—“articulations” (minute clicks and pops) played on a Moog synthesizer, a French translation of the four-syllable phrases from the original track (spoken by Mimi Johnson), and a bed of organ harmonies—and had them join the first in what he called “a kind of opera in my imagination.”³³

An apparent paradox underpins this whole process: namely, the attempt to consciously perform an involuntary action. (Ashley’s conviction that he had a mild case of Tourette’s Syndrome and his subsequent desire to explore its impact on his compositional “tendencies” was the impetus for this exercise.) Intertwined with Ashley’s confounding of involuntary and purposive acts is his blurring of the distinction between the utterances of a “real” self and those of an imagined character that one “plays.” With his trilogy, Ashley would return to these interlocking oppositions.

The characters that inhabit the trilogy begin to appear with the 1977 recording *Private Parts*, later revised as the first and last episodes of *Perfect Lives*.³⁴ Again Ashley used a form of the template approach in which he improvised on melodic and rhythmic speech patterns. “I’d go into a room,” he wrote, “close the door, and start singing. And then, when I couldn’t retain that image any longer, when I’d lost it, as it were, I’d stop.”³⁵ From this practice he derived a text, “portraits” of two people, identified only as “he” and “she” (**example 1**). Taking *Private Parts* as the starting point for a full-length television opera, Ashley continued

to work with speech-song templates to write the text that would form the five additional episodes of *Perfect Lives*. He maintained that the very essence of the process was that he only gradually discovered where the story was headed as the words were generated through this real-time, sonically oriented technique.

To return to my overarching concern, it is worth asking how this open-ended procedure could possibly have generated an allegorical work. After all, allegory is commonly described as the most deliberate of arts, with its over-determined interpretation built into its structure from the beginning. In respect to Ashley's methods, Benjamin's conception of Baroque allegorical technique is more relevant. He memorably describes the allegorist's tendency to "pile up [fragments] . . . ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal," a phrase that nicely suits Ashley's compositional technique and also resonates with the composer's characterization of how his work might be experienced by an audience: "The details pile up, and finally there is a glimmer of the larger idea."³⁶ And there *is* a larger idea: as Ashley amassed the details of *Perfect Lives* they began to form both a story and a frame to account for the story's telling, the whole of the opera apparently narrated from within itself through a series of embedded diegetic levels that are never quite explicable.

This reflexive turn is crystallized with the appearance of a cast of named characters in the middle episodes, many of whom take turns as narrators; two are the musicians performing the songs that make up *Perfect Lives* itself: Raoul de Noget (retrospectively understood as the "he" from "The Park")—a singer and the master ventriloquizer through whom all the other narrators speak—and Buddy, "The World's Greatest Piano Player." It is integral to Ashley's operatic vision that when named characters finally appear in his work they are performers of one sort or another. Indeed, "performance" is the very point of connection between these illusionistic characters and the "real" character of real people. Ashley's conception of "real" character was never predicated on the imagination of an individual's irreducible essence but on what he called distinct "personality habits." Like Ashley's attempt to channel his own presumed Tourette's in *Automatic Writing*, these habits bridge the involuntary and the consciously performative.³⁷

To better understand these personality habits, and their mediation through the figure of the performer-character, we need look no further than to Ashley's two commercially released performances of "The Park." In marked contrast with the performance on *Private Parts* (1977) in which he murmurs the lines in a strangely neutral, almost uninflected manner,³⁸ on *Perfect Lives* (1983) Ashley sings the text in a playful, colloquial, midwestern speech-song. He is presumably performing in the style of Raoul the singer, described in the opera as a "slightly seedy older man" and portrayed by Ashley in the television piece wearing a dapper white suit with bits of glitter in his gray hair. But if, with this idiosyncratic speech-song, Ashley gave birth to Raoul, he simultaneously created the template of sorts—the distinctive rhythms, stresses, and intonations—for the "real" Robert-Ashley-as-storyteller persona that he would draw on for his performances in multiple operas over the next three decades. Significantly, Ashley said that the initial transformation of his style from *Private Parts* to *Perfect Lives* resulted primarily from an unintended acquisition of "new habits" in the course of performing the piece "hundreds of times" over the three years between the two recordings.³⁹ Moreover, he commented, although he was not entirely unaware of similarities in rhythm and phrasing across decades, these were more the product of habit than intention.⁴⁰

Just as Ashley developed and amplified his own performance habits through the figure

Ashley Opera Trilogy

Example 1: Opening passages of “The Park” and “The Backyard” from *Private Parts*, later used in *Perfect Lives*. The excerpts here are reprinted from libretto of the latter.

The Park

a fact He takes himself seriously.
Motel rooms have lost their punch for him.
The feeling is *a fact* expressed in bags.
There are two and inside those two there are two more.
It's not an easy situation, *a fact* but there is something like
abandon in the air.
There is something like the feeling of the idea of *a fact*
silk scarves in the air.
There is a kind of madness to it. *a fact*
The kind we read about in magazines.
One of the bags contains
a fact a bottle of liquor.

The Backyard

A five count two three four five
She makes a double life.
two She makes two from one and one.
three She makes a perfect system every day.
four She makes it work.
five She stands there in the doorway of her mother's house
six looking at the grass and sky and at where they meet,
seven never once thinking thoughts like
eight it's so like a line,
nine or, the difference is so powerful,
ten two three four five My
or, which way shall I take to leave.

of a performer-character, from *Perfect Lives* onward he gave his collaborators similar freedom. Inventing an intricate compositional scheme for which he preserved the name “template,” Ashley would write the text and devise structural, harmonic, and temporal blueprints for each opera. However, the material that would fill in these templates was developed in collaboration with members of what Ashley referred to as his “band.” Details of pitch, rhythm and performance style reflected the vocal proclivities of singers such as Joan La Barbara, Tom Buckner, Jacqueline Humbert, and Sam Ashley as refracted through their performer-character roles (**example 2**). Likewise, the instrumental performances and “electronic orchestra” tracks in the cycle were often the product of intensive collaboration. In *Perfect Lives*, for example, Ashley brought to the recording studio a selection of “sounds” on an electronic organ (e.g., drums, brass, strings) along with some programmed tempos and chord changes, many of which had previously been worked out with pianist “Blue” Gene Tyranny during a duo tour of the work. In consultation with Ashley and “Blue” Gene, Peter Gordon (playing the off-screen role of “Music Producer”) then made modifications and added layers to the electronic orchestra mix. Superimposed upon the orchestra was a piano track—a virtuosic amalgam of boogie-woogie, lounge music, and modernist jazz—composed and improvised by the inimitable “Blue” Gene in the guise of “Buddy.”⁴¹ On this collaborative compositional conception, Ashley wrote:

In PERFECT LIVES there are no ‘melodies’ or ‘harmonies’ or other traditional devices prescribed. There are only *characters* or, more specifically, individual performers telling the same story, as embodied in the templates, synchronously. In other words, there are no melodies other than the melodies invented by “Blue” Gene (as Buddy), or melodies invented by singers. Same for harmonies In other words, the process of composing the details of the parts (characters) begins with collaboration and agreement in the recording studio and ends (never ends) only in performance.⁴²

With the appearance of the performer-character—a figure that would elicit a performance of “real” character while thematizing its status as performance—a distinct reflexivity entered Ashley’s work, as well as a narrative dimension almost entirely absent from his earlier pieces: The performer-characters exist in some kind of diegetic “world” in which, or about which, they are constantly telling stories. Thus, in order to further dissect those pairs of oppositions (“present/past” and “real/imaginary”) that jointly constitute the tension between actuality and allegory, we must turn to the level of narrative.

II – “It Was a Boring Idea Anyway”

As anyone who has heard one of Ashley’s operas would likely point out, despite my use of terms like “narrative” and “story,” it is very hard to describe what is happening in the trilogy at all. Ashley himself has called into question the value of “plot,” which, he wrote, “requires a lot of ‘exposition.’ We have to keep being reminded of what is happening. I don’t have time to do that, and it’s not interesting to work on.”⁴³ But not only is each opera in the trilogy full of stories told by the performer-characters, Ashley has also invented a scheme that places each opera into an overarching narrative, which I’ll call the “master plot.” This master plot centers upon a single event, a bank robbery of a sort: money is stolen, but for the sole purpose of being returned (“the perfect crime,” Ashley wrote). The stories that comprise *Perfect Lives* revolve around this heist, featuring the midwestern town where it occurs and some of

Ashley Opera Trilogy

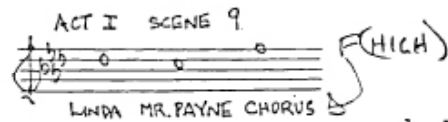
Example 2: Excerpt from the performance score of *Improvement*. Ashley writes that in many instances the assigned pitches should function merely as "a 'tonal center' for an elaborate vocal improvisation in whatever style (training) the singer brings to the role."

IMPROVEMENT (DON LEAVES LINDA) ACT I. SCENE 9 CONTENTS OF PURSE (3 beats)

Scene Nine: "The Contents of Her Purse"

Singers: Linda (every line)
with Mr. Payne (only on lines as marked)
with Chorus (IN CAPS) (5 voices)

(Note that in the duet line with Linda and Mr. Payne both voices are independently free with respect to the beat.)



LINDA: * This is the kind of talk

that got me through.

It is so full of something or other ---

little injections of regret:

w/Mr. P: "amazing as she is"

"to make a silly joke"

"as it were"

"as in; to provide"

"as you know"

"but they are wrong"

"as we say"

It is so....

1 F [Bbm]

2

3 G

4 _C

5 G

6 _Bbb

7 _Ab

8 Eb

9 _Ab

10 Eb

11 _Bb

12 C

at Home
(Act 1, Sc. 7)
in her memory
space.
Chorus is her
"new age" / affirm her
try to make
Chorus
like Linda

the local and “foreign” characters involved. With the operas that Ashley wrote after *Perfect Lives*, the master plot is scarcely alluded to in the stories themselves, which is to say, in the stories that we are told within the operas.⁴⁴ Instead, the plot functions as a kind of framing device, spelled out in some detail in liner notes and commentary, to account for where the stories come from. *Atalanta (Acts of God)*, for example, fits into the bank robbery plot only through a rationale—“flimsy to the point of being facetious”—devised after the fact, and not even by Ashley but by videographer Lawrence Brickman, who had directed that work’s video “trailer,” *Atalanta Strategy*.⁴⁵ In the account Brickman came up with and Ashley adopted, a flying saucer, having missed its appointed mark by eight thousand years, arrives in the town where *Perfect Lives* takes place at the precise moment of the bank robbery.⁴⁶ What we actually see and hear in *Atalanta (Acts of God)* are said to be the “visions” that three bank tellers have in the moment that the money is found missing.

The bank heist is again the link between the *Now Eleanor’s Idea* tetralogy and the preceding two operas. Ashley wrote that, on the night following the robbery, four characters—Eleanor, who witnessed the event as a teller at the bank; her friend Linda; Linda’s husband, Don Jr.; and their son, Junior Jr.—dream at the same time. Each dream constitutes one of the four operas.⁴⁷ His wariness of “plot” notwithstanding, Ashley was fascinated by storytelling—the process of revision, getting the telling right—and we may begin to suspect that the master plot itself is an evolving story that he has been telling over and over, in lectures, interviews, and essays, in a playfully futile endeavor to forge into a coherent whole bits and pieces that will never fit together. In a trump move that sends the whole cycle spinning into a *mise en abyme*, Ashley, apparently inspired by Brickman’s take on *Atalanta (Acts of God)*, proposed that the events of *Perfect Lives*—including, presumably, the bank robbery itself—are the vision of a fourth bank teller during the moment of the robbery.⁴⁸

Given the confusing temporality that results from embedding all the cycle’s stories within dreams and visions, it is fair to ask whether anything has “happened” at all. Indeed, Ashley’s method of unfolding narrative and musical time might be placed within an allegorical tradition of suspended temporality—what Craig Owens called allegory’s essentially “static,” “counter-narrative” form, and what Angus Fletcher before him described as the mode’s propensity to progress “with an ‘apparent motion,’ making the circular movements of the Wheel of Fortune.”⁴⁹ Although it does not follow that an allegory with a static construction is therefore *about* the stasis of time,⁵⁰ my argument in this section is that through a combination of features—narrative (or counternarrative), musical, and conceptual—each opera in Ashley’s cycle does indeed make time an explicit and thematic concern. More specifically, each opera depicts a variation on an encounter between the temporal and atemporal and seems to pose a question about the existence of time as such. The master plot itself points to this dialectic: everything transpires as a series of nonoccurrences, four simultaneous visions mirrored by four simultaneous dreams, emanating out of a “moment” that is referred to but never quite depicted, a missing center that is either the only “real” temporal event or itself not in time at all. I will interpret this as a fable of the classic aporia in the philosophy of time: the point-like present seems to be both the irreducible essence of real time and a phenomenon that never appears as such. In what I hope will double as an engaging introduction to these works for a reader unfamiliar with them, I begin with a reading of the trilogy’s temporal vexations, focusing in turn on *Perfect Lives*, *Atalanta (Acts of God)*, and the *Now Eleanor’s Idea* tetralogy.

Perfect Lives

The seven twenty-five-minute episodes of *Perfect Lives* chart twelve hours of one day in slightly shuffled order: “The Park” (11 a.m.), “The Supermarket” (3 p.m.), “The Bank” (1 p.m.), “The Bar” (11 p.m.), “The Living Room” (9 p.m.), “The Church” (5 p.m.), and “The Backyard” (7 pm). It is a day of many stories: about our musician heroes Raoul and Buddy; a pair of “old folks” (a clandestine couple) from the retirement home wandering through a supermarket; Rodney the bartender and Baby, his boogie-woogie-playing wife; the Sheriff and his wife; the “Captain of The Football Team” and his friend Dwayne, along for the ride with their high school classmates Ed and Gwyn, who have snuck off to Indiana to elope (notice the prominence of pairs); and, at the heart of all this, the bank job. Composed of digressions, jump cuts, successions of ellipses, and numerous oscillations in narrative voice, the stories run roughshod over the ostensibly schematic plotting of time and locale.

The unstable temporal flow often corresponds to narrated camera movements. At the very end of the second episode, a slow “zoom in” initiates a condensation of the story of the “old folks”: “now we zoom in slowly as we approach / we come to know more and more about their situation.” (As if parodying Ashley’s lack of interest in plot, the two-person chorus sung by David van Tieghem and Jill Kroesen keeps interjecting: “This is not very interesting, I know.”) A “close-up” on bartender Rodney’s tattooed arm at the beginning of the fourth episode inspires a double movement back in time to pasts of contrasting scales, a juxtaposition of the macrocosmic and microcosmic that we see often in Ashley’s work: first a history of cosmic origins (“In the beginning / There were rocks”), and then a story still in the town’s living memory about Rodney’s time in the army during the “good old days,” after which the camera pulls back from the arm and returns us to the present: “We start a long, a slow, / Release from Rodney and his history. / A pulling back, as they say. / Widening the shot. An unfolding. / The world streams in the edges. / I know what I’m doing. / *This is heaven*. No, not yet. / This is just the bar.” Elsewhere in *Perfect Lives* narrating voices—all channeled through Ashley/Raoul—might lurch us into the past (“Meanwhile, let’s go back in time”), or, equally abruptly, pivot into a present that breaks the already tenuous semblance of a diegetic frame (“*This is an interruption. Now listen carefully.* / What I’m telling you is true. While I am typing this, whatever it is, / The phone rings . . .”)

However, these jumps through narrative time are but the mercurial surface (if the “plot” can be considered a surface) of deeper musical structures that hint at a poetics of cyclicity, sameness-in-change, and timelessness. Together the seven episodes form an arc; the language tends to get denser (more syllables per second) from one episode to the next, reaching a climax in the sixth episode before relaxing in the last. Each individual episode is composed of numerous, quilted-together subsections (Ashley calls them “songs”), a patchwork construction that is given a sense of unity through cyclic processes that run within and across these songs (**example 3**). Furthermore, each episode is constructed according to an architectonic principle of sameness-in-difference: suggesting a fractal logic, the divisions of each episode—the subsections—are to be proportionally refracted in increasingly minute nested parts, “from the whole,” Ashley wrote, “to the smallest practical unit of measure,” so that the “smallest unit of measurement restat[es] the opera as a whole” (**example 4**).⁵¹ Again pointing to the principle of sameness-in-difference, each episode is in a different meter, but the tempos are all derived from a 72-BPM (beats per minute) pulse.⁵² On his choice of meters, Ashley explained his affinity for asymmetrical time signatures in particular: “I mean, if you

A^b/D G⁶ no 3 / D

Everything in the transitory

category turned out to

be IN ACCORD *

7

the particulars *

of our existence, *

114

A^b/D G⁶ no 3 / D

and these were divided into

physical, mental

and others * *

IN ACCORD

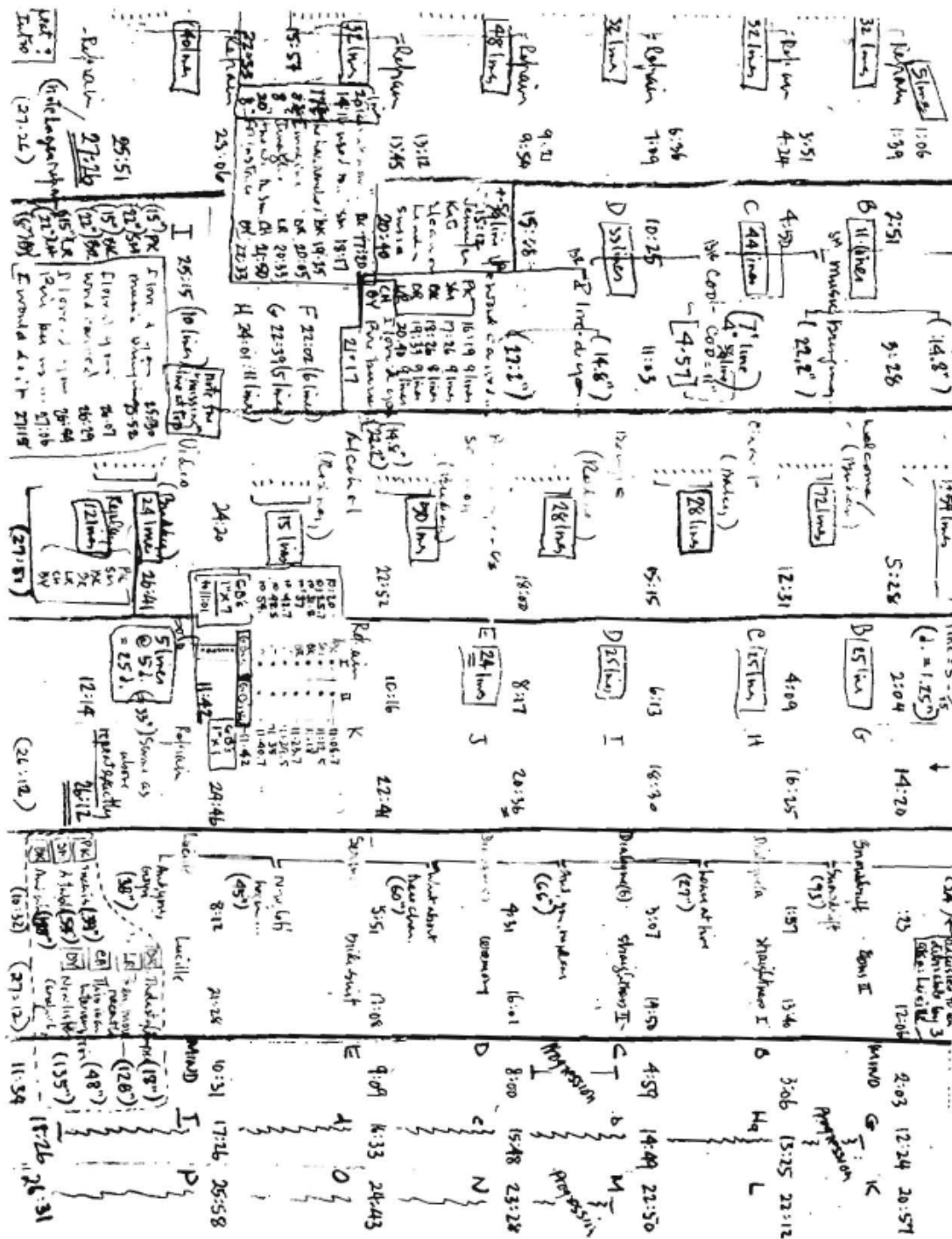
9

physical nor mental. *

Example 3: From Episode 1, "The Park," excerpted from Ashley's score for *Perfect Lives*. The meter for episode one is 13 (8 + 5). Thus, each page (four are shown in this example) contains thirteen beats. The episode is made up of ten subsections (or songs) ranging from 130 beats to 260 beats, each of which is assigned a different two syllable phrase, a kind of commentary on the narration, sung by the chorus: "A FACT" / "OF COURSE" / "AS ONE" / "NO DOUBT" / "TRUE ENOUGH" / "ALLOWED" / "IN ACCORD" / "SO RIGHT" / "I'D SAY" / "WELL SAID." The chorus chimes in with these designated phrases on specific beats in rotating patterns unique (with two exceptions) to each song. In the seventh song (excerpted here), the chorus utters "IN ACCORD" cycling through beats 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, before beginning the pattern again.

Ab/D G6 n3 3/D
Among those particulars which were neither
physical nor mental
they listed *
attainment, IN ACCORD
aging and coincidence. *

116
Ab/D G6 n3 3/D
* On the permanent side * of this
great division of reali-
ty was a notion *
they referred to
IN ACCORD as space. *

Example 4: Page of Ashley's temporal blueprint for *Perfect Lives*. (Reprinted from published libretto)

get things going in say, thirteen, *there is no time . . .* Or if you do things in sevens, you can just keep turning over that three and four *forever . . .*”⁵³ Considered in conjunction, the arc form, cyclic processes, fractal-esque structures, and “timeless” meters, embed a question that the entire opera works through, and indeed asks more or less overtly in a number of passages: How can something endure within change? Or, reciprocally: How can there be change within identity?

Ruminations on the dialectic of eternity and change emerge throughout *Perfect Lives*. In the first episode, two men sitting in the park “make a great division between that which is/ impermanent / and that which is permanent.” Later in that episode someone wonders “how it comes to you that the light has changed.” What seems at first a problem of perception (“How can it begin to change? How can the beginning go unnoticed?”) is reinterpreted a moment later as an existential question (“How can we pass from one state to another?”). As Kyle Gann observes, all these passages are allusions to the *Bardo Thodol*, the “Tibetan Book of the Dead,” a text that is to be intoned into the ear of the recently departed to guide his or her soul to the place where it may be reborn.⁵⁴ Indeed the whole of *Perfect Lives* could be understood, in the words of John Sanborn, as “a comic opera about reincarnation.” Change rendered non-change, subsumed in a cycle, echoes throughout: the bank robbery in which the money is taken only for the purpose of being returned; a marriage ceremony that is simultaneously a funeral. But counterpointing these images of the cyclical and eternal are numerous stories or utterances in a distinctly nostalgic register on the inexorability of time and change: on the way to Gwyn and Ed’s wedding, The Captain of The Football Team and Dwayne realize with some regret that the days of imagining the bride “naked in the summer dress” are soon to be “gone forever”; we learn from some voice of the town that Rodney the bartender was “never the same after he came back [from war], y’know.” And if these passages sound like clichés borrowed from movies, television, or pop songs, perhaps this hints at the presence of yet another form of cyclicity, a meta-cyclicity: *Perfect Lives* is thoroughly saturated with tropes of postwar popular entertainment (including its soap-opera-esque title) that, endlessly recycled in mass media, linger in several generations of Americans’ communal memory.⁵⁵

The opera concludes with one last superimposition of change upon nonchange. We are left in “The Backyard” in the midwestern town. The neighbors gather to watch the sunset. Ashley’s murmuring traces the “weird curve” of two orbits (“She is circling, We are circling”) in ritualistically repetitive but ever so slightly changing paratactic phrases and cycles of numbers. A gradual change of light signifies the final stage of reincarnation before the opera ends on a question and a statement of uncertainty: “Dear George, what’s going on? / I’m not the same person that I used to be” (**example 5**).

Atalanta (Acts of God)

While *Perfect Lives* could be interpreted as a temporal drama played out between cyclical and linear progression, the narrative and structural plan of *Atalanta (Acts of God)* implies a more complete disintegration of time. Nearly inexplicable as far as plot is concerned, the opera is composed of a dizzying collection of stories constructed around two themes (one is that “the Law” is expressed in architecture; the second concerns “the idea of ‘showing off’”) and three myths (the Greek myth of Atalanta, the orientalist myth of the odalisque, and the modern myth of the flying saucer), all anchored by the gravitational centers of three figures: Max Ernst, Willard Reynolds (Ashley’s uncle), and Bud Powell, who stand for image, word,

Example 5: The final passage of Episode 7, "The Backyard,"
 excerpted from Ashley's score for *Perfect Lives*.

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10 2 3 4 5 6 / SECTION *B^{m7} B^{m7} C₆*

They are places hard to fix upon the memory.

0 SIX COUNT 2 3 4 5 6 *C₆ A^m A^m*

Sundown, one, the time it disappears.

2 *E^{m7} E^{m7} E^{m7}*

Gloaming, two, the twilight, dusk.

3 *BAG/D D*

Crepuscle, the twilight, three, the half-light.

4 *D D A^m*

Twilight, four, pale purplish blue to pale violet,
 lighter than dusk blue.

14

5 *A^m C₆ GFG*
 Civil twilight, until the sun is up to six degrees

6 *G⁹ G⁹ G⁹*
 below horizon, enough light on clear days for
 ordinary occupations.

7 *G⁹ A^m A^m*
 Nautical twilight, until the sun is up to twelve
 degrees below horizon.

8 *C₆ GFG B^{m7}*
 Astronomical twilight, until the sun is eighteen
 degrees down, more or less.

9 *B^{m7} B^{m7} AGF#*
 Clair de lune, five, greener and paler than dusk.

10 2 3 4 5 6 / SECTION C C E^{m7}

Dusk, six, redder and darker than clair de lune.

P FIVE COUNT 2 3 4 5

Dear George, what's going on?

2 2 3 4 5

I'm not the same person that I used to be.

END 2 3 . . . 16

E⁷A⁷ A⁷G
D D A^m

A⁷G / D D
C C C C

and music, respectively.⁵⁶ These figures never appear as characters, and in his afterword accompanying the published libretto—which is tellingly prefaced by a “proverb,” “a lot of explaining can spoil anything”—Ashley writes, “In the way it works today, a plot is simply the reason that the singing characters are all in the same place at the same time. In *Atalanta (Acts of God)* that reason is not quite clear, even to me, and so I haven’t named or otherwise defined the singing characters.”⁵⁷ Indeed, we hear numerous absurd accounts throughout the opera about what is really supposed to be happening. According to one conceit, the entirety of the work comes from a recently discovered “manuscript” of a television opera from the 1940s.⁵⁸

Text material is splintered, condensed, and recycled throughout an opera that Ashley imagined as a collection of stories told “endlessly” by mythical characters.⁵⁹ He wrote that “all stories” told in *Atalanta (Acts of God)* should be understood as if “enacted in the same time. There are present and past tenses but there is no before and after in the plot.”⁶⁰ In an attempt to convey this quality of endlessly suspended time in the live performances, Ashley developed an open, combinatoric form.⁶¹ The work is comprised of three main sections, corresponding to the three men, each of which is divided into nine matching scenes (**example 6**). For any given performance, a “Character Reference” and “Anecdote with Admonition and Song” from one of the main sections is chosen. To this pair can be added any number of the other scenes from any of the three main sections as long as no type of scene—for example, “Odalisque,” “Headlines,” or “Gossip”—is repeated.

The narrative collapse of sequential temporality is thematically elaborated on in a number of passages that comically attack the very idea of time. In Max’s “anecdote,” for example, the narrator’s attempt to employ the archetypal fairy tale opening immediately dissolves, as the existence of the past itself is called into question: “Begin, of course, with once upon a time, though more and more now, finally, that notion is doubtful to be widely held—especially as it is joined among us in our tiny, tiny circle to finally. More and more now there are strange lights in the sky, and the sense of a past, known through its moment-to-moment-like meshing with the present, is held in doubt. That’s just as well. It was a boring idea, anyway.”

Nevertheless, many of the stories told in *Atalanta (Acts of God)* center upon a mythicized American past sometime in the 1930s and 1940s, and, perhaps in homage to Bud Powell, there is a recurring walking-bass theme in the electronic orchestra. But whatever atmospheric power this period exerts over the work, there is an implication of a kind of historical doublespeak: in speaking of the past we are really speaking of the present. Thus, in the “Empire” episode, a story that intersperses scenes from Depression era life with a mock history of the tomato—its “taming” in the form of ketchup, the subsequent invention of “tomato soup” by impoverished itinerants, the ensuing rivalry between Heinz and Campbell—is, Ashley wrote, “an allegorical telling of the founding of one of the great multinational corporations.” (This is, notably, the first overtly allegorical tale in Ashley’s trilogy.) Ashley, ever given to slipping into the figure of the spy, elaborated: “The story was told to me by the scion of the family of that corporation. I have changed the names (and the product) to protect the privacy of the source. And I have deliberately made the metaphor (soup) more casual and humorous than the actuality of corporate America.”⁶² The coded corporation is itself rendered a synecdoche of postwar capitalism as the story brings us up to the globalized order of the present (the 1980s):

Ashley Opera Trilogy

Example 6: The three parts of *Atalanta (Acts of God)* and their nine respective scenes. On the formal plan, Ashley writes: “[A]s a metaphor, I ask the reader to imagine three solar systems (the three characters and their stories) much like ours, with small planets, large planets, moons and whatever, all planets going at different speeds and all concentric to the same ‘sun’--the mythical figures Atalanta and the Odalisque. The three solar systems have the same kind and same number of planets and moons. So, a small planet or a large planet from one system is interchangeable with the same small planet or large planet from another system.” Ashley, “The Afterword,” *Atalanta (Acts of God)*, 192.

MAX

M Requirements of Desire

It's a Girl
Odalisque
Character Reference
Anecdote with Admonition and Song
Headlines
Family Stories: Jodie, Shirley Liu, Sissy
Gossip
The Etchings
Problems in the Flying Saucer

WILLARD

Wuh . . . Mountain Country Courtship

It's a Girl
Odalisque
Character Reference
Anecdote with Admonition and Song
Headlines
Family Stories: The Mystery of the River, The Mule in the Tree,
Queen Bee, The Peach Pit
Gossip
Empire
Problems in the Flying Saucer

BUD

Plan B Desire (with Leopards)

It's a Girl
Odalisque
Character Reference
Anecdote with Admonition and Song
Headlines
Family Stories: I & II
Gossip
Air Pair
Problems in the Flying Saucer

After the old man, the empire diversified. Tomato soup started drilling oil, mining diamonds, mutual funds in hock. Anything to make a buck. Why go on? Everybody knows the story. Thousands and thousands of employees. Larger than most countries. And every person, to a man, wears grey socks under cordovan brogues. Whole industries grow to keep them uniform.

A couple of drinks makes the future rosy. Thank God the nationalities will disappear. The Russians will drink Coca-Cola. The Chinese Pepsi. Or is it the other way around? Thank god for a corporate world divided. Thank god for tomato soup over Catholics or French. Thank god tomato soup, in its deep self-interest, will free the black African from the mines. It'll take about ten generations.

Although Ashley often claimed that his operatic universe was free of evil, the banality of which is already sufficiently represented in corporate media, the present and future projected in "Empire" are, for all the work's humor, shrouded in negativity. Corporate domination of the present seems to be as real as neoliberal optimism for the future is delusional.

THE NOW ELEANOR'S IDEA TETRALOGY

The past appears to be the major preoccupation in the *Now Eleanor's Idea* tetralogy, the "theme" of which is "genealogy." According to Ashley's allegorical scheme, the operas depict the process by which descendants of immigrants to America, having reached the western edge of the continent, look back, combing through family stories in search of nearly forgotten origins. Four allegories are embedded in this larger plan. In each opera a character first introduced in *Perfect Lives* embarks on a spiritual quest that is meant to depict the history of one of America's "major religions": Judaism in *Improvement (Don Leaves Linda)*, Protestantism in *Foreign Experiences*, Catholicism in *Now Eleanor's Idea*, and Business (or "corporate mysticism") in *eL/Aficionado*. It is perhaps not unrelated to this looking backward that the operas in the tetralogy, *Improvement* in particular, make the most explicit use of older allegorical and musical techniques. In the opening "Prelude" Ashley as The Narrator didactically announces the allegory: "For the sake of argument Don is Spain in 1492 / And Linda is the Jews." Twenty-six additional correspondences are provided in a key printed in the libretto (**example 7**), a concertedly Baroque gesture complemented by Ashley's adaptation of the seventeenth-century passacaglia form to harmonically structure the opera (**example 8**).

Nevertheless, Ashley is generally not a composer drawn to appropriating old styles, and he finds other ways throughout the tetralogy to give the sense of a past sonically shadowing the present. That Linda is somehow more than the mid-twentieth-century American woman she appears to be, that she is connected to a deep history, is conveyed by the recording technique used to create her voice. Numerous takes of each passage by Jacqueline Humbert were superimposed, producing a composite voice that has a rich, shimmering resonance because of its layered, nearly coinciding pitched vowels, as well as a strange quality of just-off multiplicity, the result of consonant articulations misaligned on the order of milliseconds.⁶³ But no character in the tetralogy embodies the immanent presence of the past more than its titular character, Now Eleanor, sung by Joan La Barbara. In *Now Eleanor's Idea*, after the onset of an "Approach of the End of the World Feeling," Now Eleanor leaves her job at the bank to "find out who she 'is.'" "Curiously," Ashley wrote in his plot summary, "she believes this means to find out who she 'was'—as if there is a hidden past she has not acknowledged." This past announces itself in two forms: as her "double"—a woman from the lowrider car culture of Chimayó, New Mexico (sung by Amy X Neuberg)—and as her Spanish-speaking guardian

Example 7: Prefatory Schema and The Allegory for *Improvement*.

Improvement *(Don Leaves Linda)*

Idea	EXPERIENCE
Arena	THEATER
Imagery	LANDSCAPE
Technique	COLLAGE (3-D effect)
Protagonist	LINDA <i>"A sense of self-satisfaction, given off, follows everything she does."</i>
Style	ANSWERS <i>Requiring an attitude of restrained exaggeration. Every point seems to portend more than can be justified.</i>
Model	ALLEGORY <i>"Also, as part of the nesting instinct she puts things on all of the chairs."</i>
Subject	A PEOPLE
Example	THE JEWS
Reference	THE KABALA
Theme	IDENTITY
Code	1492

THE ALLEGORY

Linda	The Jews
Don	Spaniards
New Eleanor	America
Junior, Jr.	The descendants of Jews and non-Jews (i.e., us)
Mr. George Payne	Giordano Bruno
Mr. Payne's mother	The Roman Catholic Church
Tap dancing	The Art of Memory
A car with a rumble seat	Integrated Philosophy
Left-handed golf	Cosmology (Bruno's)
The Narrator	Omniscience
The Airline Ticket Counter	The Inquisition
The Correspondences Text	Exploration
The Unimportant Family	The Sear Chamber
The Indifference Text	The Affirmation
Back home...	Some recanted
A moment (very late)...	Exile
The Big City	Assimilation
The Doctor	Analysis (Marxism, etc.)
The Good Life	Art
Trouble	Politics
A place in the country	Israel
Happiness, prosperity...	America 1952
The Office	The idea of an historic refuge
The Bridge Game	Self-image
North	Berlin (Style)
East	River Rouge (The Movement)
South	Campo dei Fiori (History)
West	Atlantis "as far back as you can go (at least, on this system)..."

Example 8: A structural plan by the composer for *Improvement*. The 24-note passacaglia is at the bottom. Each scene is centered around one pitch. (From Ashley, *Outside of Time: Ideas About Music*). For more information see Gann, Robert Ashley, 90-91.

The structural plan for *Improvement* is organized into columns for scenes and rows for musical elements. The scenes are listed at the top, and the musical elements are listed on the right. The 24-note passacaglia is shown at the bottom.

Scenes: PRELUDE, TURN-OFF, AIRLINE T.C., CORRESP. TEXT, RIDE TO TOWN, AIRLINE T.C., INDIFF. TEXT, TELEPHONE, CAR/RUMBLESEAT, CONTENTS/PURGE, DINNER/NATION, JR. JR. REGRETS, ALL NITE DELI., BIG CITY, TARZAN (INSERT), DREAM/PARTY, DOCTOR (INSERT), CAFE/THE LIST, TROUBLE, PLACES BETTER, HAPPINESS, LETTER FROM SON, BERLIN, RIVER ROUGE, ROME, ATLANTIS.

Musical Elements:

- 2 SC-GROUPS SAME ORDER
- MELODY
- DIAPHRAGM
- MONOLOGUE
- QUASI-DIALOGUE
- ALTERNATION OF DIALOG/MONOLOGUE
- LINDA SINGS
- PASSACAGLIA
- CHORUS SINGS
- PASSACAGLIA
- CHORUS INTERJECTIONS
- 4 SC-GROUPS SAME ORDER
- JR. JR.
- LINDA "AT HOME"
- PASSACAGLIA

Legend:

- = LINDA SOLO
- = OTHER VOICE SOLO
- = NON-SOLO

Passacaglia: A 24-note sequence of pitches, each corresponding to a scene. The sequence is: PRELUDE, TURN-OFF, AIRLINE T.C., CORRESP. TEXT, RIDE TO TOWN, AIRLINE T.C., INDIFF. TEXT, TELEPHONE, CAR/RUMBLESEAT, CONTENTS/PURGE, DINNER/NATION, JR. JR. REGRETS, ALL NITE DELI., BIG CITY, TARZAN (INSERT), DREAM/PARTY, DOCTOR (INSERT), CAFE/THE LIST, TROUBLE, PLACES BETTER, HAPPINESS, LETTER FROM SON, BERLIN, RIVER ROUGE, ROME, ATLANTIS.

angel (sung by Marghreta Cordero).

All that is affirmative in *Now Eleanor's* radiant dream of ancestral history has its inverse counterpart in *Foreign Experiences*, where the past pursues the present like a spectral curse. Ashley's alter ego, Junior Jr., is haunted by a ghost ("As if some unsolved social problem from the past / Comes back I told you it follows me home.") Barely transfigured bits from a dark period of the composer's life surface (divorce, depression, drinking, California), as do strains of his earlier works: rumbling beneath the electronic orchestra in the first act is the 1959 piano sonata *Christopher Columbus Crosses to the New World in the Niña, the Pinta and the Santa Maria Using Only Dead Reckoning and a Crude Astrolabe*; later we hear the line "She was a visitor," taken from Ashley's 1967 opera *That Morning Thing*, which he composed after the suicides of three friends, all women. A final apparitional quality is imparted by the mix on the recording, which features two voices, those of Sam Ashley and Jacqueline Humbert, while retaining faint traces of an earlier seven-voice live recording, nearly but not quite sub-auditory. (The production wizardry of Tom Hamilton, one of Ashley's longstanding collaborators, is largely responsible for the recorded beauty of the vocal effects in the tetralogy.)

Ramifying these sonic images of deep history surfacing in the present are narratives that seem to move forward and backward at once. Points of scenic distension and manipulation notwithstanding, in each opera the flow of "events" progresses forward, sometimes by leaps ("Abruptly we have moved ahead in time," Ashley as narrator in *Improvement* tells us; "I forgot to say this is years later," sings Sam Ashley in *Foreign Experiences*). But each opera is also marked by intimations of a contrary motion or a doubling back. The spy protagonist sung by Tom Buckner in *eL/Aficionado* undergoes a series of interrogations in which he recounts successively more distant events. "As the details accumulate," he is told by his superiors, he will experience a "straightforward regression." And like Benjamin's allegory of the allegorist, the Angel of History, Linda faces backward as she is propelled into the future at an increasingly rapid clip in the second act of *Improvement*: "That's the end of Linda's story," Ashley dryly intones. "Playing Bridge with friends. Sharing pictures from the past—too complicated for photography." Her contemplation of the story we have just heard—abandonment by her husband in the Southwest, new lovers, her career, her son—is followed by oblique hints of the secret allegory in songs on the cardinal directions: north to Berlin and the Holocaust; east to River Rouge (in Dearborn, Michigan, the site of a Ford plant constructed in 1928; Gann connects this to the allegory of the Jews through Henry Ford's notorious anti-Semitism); south to Campo dei Fiori where Giordano Bruno was burned in 1600; and, finally, west to Atlantis where time begins its cycle again—"What comes next is what was first, or so they say. / As far back as we can go / (At Least on this system)."⁶⁴ In the final scene of the last opera in the tetralogy, *Now Eleanor's Idea*, the narration of cyclical history is replayed at another level of remove, "inside" the plot, as *Now Eleanor* sings a song of the Ages up to the present Sixth Age ("all that has happened so far") before beginning a final movement into an eschatological Seventh Age that should loop back to the beginnings of time.⁶⁵

Eternity and the Present

Different complex temporalities are articulated throughout the trilogy, but, whether in the reincarnation process of *Perfect Lives*, the "endless" structural reshuffling of *Atalanta (Acts of God)*, or the apocalyptic cycles of the *Now Eleanor's Idea* tetralogy, the dominant reference is always to a form of suspended or cyclical time. However, these glimpses of the atemporal or

eternal must be considered in conjunction with a phenomenological problem that is a source of concern in almost every opera: How can the point-like present, or the “now” be experienced? Ashley’s characters worry about this incessantly. For Rodney the bartender it causes problems in his marriage to Baby: “She speaks of nowness. Everything is now, Rodney. / Be with me now. *Now*. / Gimme ‘Little Loving.’ Nowness is all. Rodney’s going / Crazy. His sense of now is rusty.” Other characters have a more articulated sense of the slipperiness in “meshing with the present,” as Max’s anecdote in *Atalanta (Acts of God)* would have it. Don’s principal quest in *Foreign Experiences* is to learn how “to live in real time,” while in *Improvement* Linda tries to describe her experience of the present as a state of acceleration from behind: “Approaching the present, time is compressed / Toward an infinite Now, infinitely fast!” / She tells them. (What an idea, Linda!)”

Not incidentally, in his essays on composition Ashley imagined a music that would conflate the “real-time” present and the eternal. On one hand, he was dedicated to in-the-moment, “uncut” methods of composition, and his conception of television opera was based on the premise that television is the paradigmatic medium of “real time.”⁶⁶ On the other hand, he rhapsodized about the possibilities of an “endless” music and was drawn to television’s potential for infinite repetition. This antinomy is sublimated in what Ashley called the “non-timeline concept” or the “drone concept,” which he described as a compositional tendency among radical American composers of his generation to treat sound as if it were “outside of time” (the title of the composer’s collected writings). The result should be a music that downplays sonic “eventfulness,” and an ensuing experience of sound as object-like and divested of temporality. “The sound is everything,” Ashley wrote. “The sound has no temporal dimensions. It exists apart from the listener’s participation. In non-timeline music nothing happens. The sound is simply there.”⁶⁷

Although the drone concept would at first appear to shift the balance entirely to the side of the atemporal, upon closer inspection it points the way to an interlocking of Ashley’s poetics of eternity with the experiential dilemma of the “now.” Two decades before articulating the drone concept in essays, the composer hinted at it in two passages from *Perfect Lives* in which the present and eternal converge. In the fourth episode, after we are told that Baby is learning piano from video tapes, Ashley sings: “CCEE CCGG CCBB CCGG / CCEE CCGG CCBB CCGG. / Always,” and then proclaims boogie-woogie “the vessel of the eternal present.” (In the theoretical writings, Ashley speculated that the drone concept may be indebted to musics that are more harmonically static than European art music, including American vernacular styles.) Later in that episode, during an ecstatic sermon, Buddy speaks explicitly of the drone: “The moment . . . / is forever. / Structure is a performance of minding, what is / Ahead of us and what’s behind. / The drone and all its forms must amplify the / Moment to career dimensions.”

While Ashley’s use of the term “drone” is somewhat unorthodox, taken within the context of a concern with temporal perception it might suggestively recall the example of the continuous, unchanging tone invoked by both Augustine and Husserl in their seminal phenomenological investigations of time. For these philosophers, the drone was a heuristic concept employed to think through the aporias engendered by the idea of the present.⁶⁸ And for Augustine, at least, the paradox of a present so fleeting that it would have no duration at all follows from an initial, religious speculation on eternity. In a passage from *Atalanta (Acts of God)*, Ashley even follows, in his own fashion, the phenomenologists’ lead and suggests

that the existence of objective time is subordinated to the processes of the mind. The past ("known by its moment-to-moment-like meshing with the present") is placed in doubt ("a boring idea anyway"), after which the category of time itself is dispensed with:

The notion of time is of doubtful value to us.
The sense of a past, distinguished from a present, is held in doubt.
The meshing in our consciousness is of importance.
We have named the meshing: past, present, future.
We could have named it something else:
"Everywhere," for instance.

But doesn't it travesty both philosophical discourse and Ashley's operas to read these passages on the boogie-woogie sublime and time-meshing consciousness as if they were temporal theories comparable to the dialectics of memory and anticipation advanced by Augustine and Husserl? In the next section I argue that if this is indeed the case, it is only because, by interpreting Ashley's work as a text, I have ignored the dimension of actual sonic and temporal experience that was in question in the first place, and thereby missed the very substance of the allegory. Time, constituted by consciousness, may have been placed under the sign of language ("we could have named it something else"), but the problematics of temporality will return once more within sonorous language itself.

III – "A Long Whining Sound"

Both the traditional critique of allegory by the Romantics as well as its more recent critical resuscitation by modernist and postmodernist theorists have hinged on a similar interpretation of the mode's temporality: the time of allegorical signification is said to be noninstantaneous, gapped, and deferred.⁶⁹ It is not unrelated to such temporal ascriptions that allegory has also been understood by nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers alike to belong to the province of the intellect, as an art in which "the eccentric embrace of meaning," as Benjamin would have it, has indisputable priority over the immediacy of sensory perception.⁷⁰ Angus Fletcher, as just one example, states that allegory "does not accept the world of experience and the senses; it thrives on their overthrow, replacing them with ideas."⁷¹ If the thematics of time and perception that pervade Ashley's librettos and essays demand that more attention be paid to the experience of his operas, does this mean we must forego further consideration of allegory? In reference to my opening dichotomy, would sensory and experiential effects be on the side of actuality, and meaning on the side of allegory? Certainly the web of allegorical correspondences in *Improvement* would seem intended more for retrospective analysis than real-time listening. But is it not telling that, according to Ashley's prefatory schema preceding the enumeration of these correspondences, the "Idea" of *Improvement* is "experience" (see example 5)?

Any description of allegory that would absolutely subordinate the sensuous to the meaningful faces a problem: in the disjunction of sense and meaning, the materiality of the signifier and corresponding dimension of sensory experience would seem to be rendered semiautonomous and therefore, in some way, accentuated. In other words, positing an antagonistic or arbitrary relation between the sensible and the meaningful does not necessarily diminish the force of either.⁷² Benjamin was especially sensitive to this dialectic. Although he

aligned Baroque allegory with the realm of meaning, he described visual and sonic properties “flaunted as objects” in a language “convulsed by rebellion on the part of the elements which make it up.”⁷³ Thus, although writing, in its proximity to meaning, remained the paradigm of allegory for Benjamin, he located one of its deepest antinomies—the “tense polarity” between the sensuous and the meaningful—in the spoken word.⁷⁴ He memorably writes that speech is “afflicted by meaning . . . as if by an inescapable disease.”⁷⁵ I should stress that Benjamin *liked* what he called the “phonetic tension” in language and that he lamented the historical development by which the *Trauerspiel* allegedly passed into opera, giving itself over, in his narrative, to the purely sensuous and thereby shedding the allegorical “obstacle of meaning.”⁷⁶

I rehearse this at some length because Benjamin’s theory of allegory—in particular, his wonderful metaphor of meaning as a pathological condition in the case of the spoken word—is especially pertinent to the reflections on the schism between sound and meaning in language found throughout Ashley’s operas, which are mostly delivered in densely wordy speech-song. In Max’s “anecdote” from *Atalanta (Acts of God)*, for example, we hear that “speech is different from—uhn—meaning. Otherwise it would be impossible. Who could speak if every word had meaning,” and later on:

Now, you can see that this gets complicated. For instance, in order to remember that the words have no meaning—this is Carl’s idea—except the ongoing action of our making of the sounds of them, but—/ This is my idea—that mostly in them, and hopefully in us, they coincide with what’s going on anyway in the network of the connections between us—that is, as modulators, coincide, as actions, with what’s going on anyway in the network of the connections between us.

The idea seems to be that while it may be desirable that words, or the sound of words, and something like meaning (“what’s going on anyway in the network”) coincide, they constitute two independent, parallel strata. Similarly, *Perfect Lives* is full of images of sound and language peeling apart. In “The Park,” we hear that when the man “is alone, he forgets sometimes to walk. / He just moves As sometimes he forgets to combine talk with thinking, and / just thinks or just talks.” Later we are told that when he “says hello, you hear a long whining sound, / which is his voice and the hello. / It is as different from whatever (the way one might remember) / as a sound a cat would make.” Fittingly, it is left to Dwayne—a character who, according to The Captain of The Football Team, “can barely talk”—to explain the basic dilemma of language. “Dwayne says / There’s a problem, *that sometimes* the sound and the word *get disconnected*. / I think that’s *what he says*.” Growing increasingly agitated, Ashley-as-Dwayne demonstrates the point:

Dwayne, my name, is three sounds in one word or / Three hills or bumps, a kind of inter-something, where you can’t get / Them apart. The words mean Two, or Twoness, two things: / Dwayne, two-one, but there are three sounds and you can’t get / Them apart. I keep saying it to myself: Dquayne Djuayne / Duwayne Dowayne Dewayne Dhwayne Dwayne / I can’t figure out how they got together. (Well said.)

A host of ideas about time and speed accompany these reflections on speech. According to the passage in *Atalanta (Acts of God)* quoted above, the momentary, if unstable, attachment of sound to meaning in speech is a “modulation” that works to slow down some kind of warp-speed “connection” in the network of human beings (“us”): “So, to protect those connections, which are our Sargasso Sea—(Boy, that’s a hard one. You are our Sargasso Sea. Nice going,

man.)—we have to talk to slow things down. I mean, the connections would blow up, if we did not have talk to slow things down.” We then learn that because foul language is the kind of speech in which sound and something like meaning are most closely entwined (“the words that most act like words”) it “slows things down the most.” (Making a similar point, in *Foreign Experiences* Don discovers, in the course of his effort to learn to live in the present, that cursing “fucks the tempo, The fucking thing slows down, and you start / Thinking again!”) Conversely, with increased speed, in frenzied and overlapping speech, sound and meaning pull apart (“Fastness gives up on the possibility of coincidence—I mean, the coincidence between the actions of the modulations and what’s going on anyway in the network of the connections between us”), which leads to an experiential ecstasy (“wild abandon”) of the present (“we approach the speed of the moment-to-moment-like meshing itself”).

While these ruminations on language keep circling back to the uneasy relationship between sound and sense in time, they never cohere into a “philosophy.” Nor are they supposed to. These are operas, after all, not treatises, and the pseudophilosophical statements emanate from pseudocharacters who should hardly be expected to tell it to us straight. But if the various formulations about meaning, sound, and time expire in obscurity and nonsense, some of what they seem to be trying to say is reflexively enacted in the very process of their sonic utterance. Delivered by Ashley and his ensemble in their respective characteristic styles of an “American English” that hovers between speech and song, the language in his work is for the most part discernible, not drawn out or obscured as it often is in operatic singing. But although the words form phrases that tend to have a colloquial, somewhat straightforward ring, they are often mysteriously opaque upon examination. Kyle Gann acutely observes that although “[t]here is an implied vastness *beyond* the words and music . . . in a way there is nothing *beneath* or *behind* them. We are not meant to comprehend. We are meant to hear.”⁷⁷ Add to linguistic allusiveness the mesmerizing speed and density of words over long spans of time, and the momentary flickering of meaning often dissolves into a fugitive, semi-lingual sound experience.⁷⁸ (In many ways, the experience of language in Ashley’s work is not unlike that of much hip-hop, to which it has often been compared.) Thus the audience faces two intersecting orders of difficulty: the interpretation of strings of words (as text), and the cognition of audible words over long spans of time. But Gann’s insight notwithstanding, given the singing style’s proximity to speech, in Ashley’s work the “obstacle of meaning” that Benjamin located in the spoken word is never too far away.

And so, in respect to the passages explicitly concerning sound and meaning, we find ourselves caught in a performative reflexive structure that is both tautological and paradoxical: those specific “arrangement[s] of sounds” (spoken or sung words) that are supposed to mean something about the tenuous connection between meaning and sound have the exact trouble meaning this that they claim to have. We could compare this with what Paul de Man calls a “metafigural” allegory, the “allegory of a figure” (a figure of speech, or rhetorical figure) that “relapses into the figure it deconstructs.” This kind of aporetic structure, de Man wrote, “persists in performing what it has shown to be impossible to do.”⁷⁹ But here a distinction should be made between the kind of allegorical reflexivity described by de Man and that enacted in Ashley’s operas. The signifying structure of language, its suspension in an infinite play between literal and figural reference, is de Man’s topic, not sonorous, temporal speech, which is bracketed from the start as the locus of the metaphysics of presence. (De Man was especially wary of language’s sonic seductiveness.⁸⁰) The de Manian attempt to imagine lan-

guage's supposed propensity to allegorize reflexively its own infinite deferral of meaning might lead to a moment of vertiginous ecstasy (or despair) in the one who contemplates it—what might be called the deconstructive sublime. Fundamentally, however, de Man's version of deconstruction does not purport to describe an experiential structure, but rather the impossibility of access to genuine, unmediated temporal experience in the first place. Thus, if Ashley's works reflexively articulate somewhat related linguistic aporias, their experiential concerns and sonic instantiation demand a different kind of interpretation. If we are trying to talk about "real" experience, it will be noted that the effect of listening to Ashley's operas is obviously not of having one's mind explode in the infinite regress of self-reflection. In these metareflexive linguistic allegories, the shuttling back and forth between audition and representation, between "surface" of sound and "depth" of linguistic reference, occurs on the edge of the moment.

IV – The Assault of the Present on the Rest of Time⁸¹

(o Statue,
o Republic, o
Tell-A-Vision, the best
is soap. The true troubadours
are CBS. Melopoeia

is for Cokes by Cokes out of
Pause.

-Charles Olson, *Maximus Poems*

Working toward a conclusion, I wish to bring together the figure of the performer-character, the temporal themes discussed above, and the experience of sonic language as the elements of an allegory about storytelling and history. Complementing the theories about language, throughout the cycle we encounter bits of commentary on the eloquence of expression, or lack thereof, exhibited by characters in their attempts to explain an idea or tell a story. On one hand, inadequacy, awkwardness, and fundamental incoherence as the condition of language are intimated in the frequent failures to express or understand. Characters are continually stopped short by the difficulty of expression: "uhn"; "How do I say this, it's so simple?"; "(LONG PAUSE)"; "(This is hard!)"; "What is the word?" Interlocutors interject with denigrating commentary: "Not too well said, but something." On the other hand, verbal performances are often met by a litany of praise: "Well said!" is a sort of mantra throughout the cycle—although a possible ironic valence can never be discounted.

Both critical and adulatory interjections are especially common in scenes that I will refer to as "strong" performances. Although the entire cycle may be understood as a series of embedded performances by performer-characters, within the ever-shifting frame some scenes more than others resemble what is commonly called "diegetic" performance: a performance that constitutes a plot element, or a performance that occurs "inside" the story. (Given the numerous ambiguities in Ashley's operas that render any attempt to make clear-cut distinctions between levels of diegesis suspect, I prefer to use a relative term like "strong.") These "strong" performances often reference codified performance types: In *Perfect Lives*, Buddy gives two sermons in the bar; later in the opera, two more sermons, on the occasion

of the marriage, are performed by the Justice of the Peace; *Foreign Experiences* ends with three increasingly unhinged lectures by revolutionaries; *Now Eleanor's Idea* concludes with "the song of the three great families" sung by the title character; most of *eL/Aficionado* transpires as the performance of a spy recounting past cases and experiences under the duress of interrogation from his superiors; the interrogations in *Improvement* lead to long answers, monologues that function somewhat like arias in traditional opera. Notably, these strong performances tend to foreground the cycles' "big ideas," often in the form of stories about a distant past. They are also, I believe, the loci of the cycle's allegorical reflexivity—the moments in which a performance by a performer-character seems most concertedly to stand for the present actuality of the "real performance." In a Möbius-strip movement, the farther *into* the artifice of plot we go—i.e., the more strongly emplotted the performance is—the closer we get to the surface of actuality. Likewise, in a reiteration of the tetralogy's forward-backward motion, the deeper into the past we look, the closer we come to the present.

And there is an additional dimension to this allegorical structure: we, as the audience, are inscribed in the allegory through the scattered commentary. This is somewhat akin to what de Man refers to as the second level of allegory, or the text's self-deconstruction at a "second or third level of remove," in which it narrates "'the failure to read' on top of the first level of reflexivity."⁸² When we hear, for example, that "*Dwayne says / There's a problem, that sometimes the sound and the word get disconnected. / I think that's what he says,*" the reflexive allegory about sound and meaning is recast in a corresponding problem of misunderstanding or hearing incorrectly, and, as such, forms a miniature parable of the audience's experience caught in the opera's deluge of words. We should not, however, assume that the bits of commentary necessarily accord with our reactions. In order to interpret the cycle's ultimate message about the significance of telling stories—which are, perhaps by definition, stories told in a kind of present about a kind of past—a "real" experience of some of these "strong" scenes (by necessity, my attempt to render my experience) might be weighed against the doubles' words to complete the circuit of signification. I have neither rejected hermeneutic interpretation nor an experiential encounter with sound, but wish to examine how the two touch in a body of work that is about their touching.

It is particularly significant that the scenes of strong performance in which some character attempts to say something of import about the past are often among the most sonically intoxicating and linguistically confusing passages in the trilogy. Take, for example, Don's "Correspondences Text" from *Improvement*. The Agent at the Airline Ticket Counter interrogates Don about abandoning Linda. Don maintains that she is not angry, and, asked how this is possible, launches into a long monologue, a kind of aria: beginning enigmatically (with chorus interjections)—"As if The Commander had spoken sharply to them, they / ground . . . (LONG PAUSE)—what is the word?—'they ground . . . ' (LONG PAUSE FOLLOWED BY EXTRAVAGANT / GESTURE / TO SIGNIFY THE ABSENCE OF THE ADVERB)—to a halt"—he continues by expounding on the meaning of roads ("unframed in time") versus architecture ("framed in time,"), before getting to the main topic: the "correspondences" between the "Ziggurats at Ur," the "Pyramids at Giza," and the "World Trade Center at New York."⁸³ The perplexity engendered by the text is compounded by its sonic instantiation as the utterance of a composite voice, made up of the superimposition of numerous tracks of Tom Buckner singing, speaking, and loudly whispering the text (not unlike the technique used to create Linda's voice) in a nearly nonstop barrage of words. By the middle of the scene, the percussive staccato of the

weird whispering has nearly overwhelmed the voiced sounds. Meanwhile, the very present electronic orchestra counterpoints Buckner's heterophonic multi-voice with slow oscillations of a low C and G, quick pulsations in a high register, and a gradual cycling through segments from the passacaglia that governs the opera's tonal areas. After close to three minutes of Don's mesmerizing chatter, subsumed within the polyphonic texture, a listener would likely have forgotten that it all began as a response to the Airline Ticket Agent's question, "How is that possible?" We are perhaps taken aback to recall all this when Don abruptly ends his diatribe and resumes the dialogue with the modest question: "Do you know what I mean?" The agent's answer—"Well, sort of. I get the idea that this is a subject that you are interested in"—is probably about all that most listeners would take away from the "Correspondences Text."

Later in *Improvement*, the tendentious Doctor—the allegorical figure of "analysis (Marxism, etc.)"—forces a session of dream interpretation on Linda at a party, and then sings a four-minute monologue on a single pitch, in which he tries to explain something about the historical process of secularization and about those who have been left behind by modernity ("the Fourth World, the world of those who are 'different' with a difference that is independent of geography"). The monotony makes it difficult to stay alert, but certain words and phrases stand out ("offering," "secularization," "differences"), in part because of a hypnotic process in which a second voice, joined by the electronic orchestra, alternately repeats and anticipates words from the doctor's story (**example 9**). Once again, a trance-inducing speech with major pretensions is met with a curt, dismissive comment. This time, the Chorus, presumably voicing Linda's thoughts, chimes in with a condensed statement of the passacaglia:

THANK YOU, DOCTOR.
 NOT TOO WELL SAID, BUT SOMETHING.
 GRANTED IT'S A HARD IDEA.
 HARD TO EXPRESS AND FAR FROM REASSURING.
 BUT WE'LL KEEP YOUR CARD ON FILE. JUST IN CASE.

The three revolutionary "lectures from the underground" that conclude *Foreign Experiences* are likewise bombastic, although more decidedly angry and profane. The first—on the way the "game is played between those who have and those who don't"—includes a caustic assessment of language: "The words don't have no meaning they are just a uniform / You put on to get you in a certain line of work / They don't have no fucking meaning at all we're created / In the image of the state of confusion of thinking / About something that does not have no fucking meaning because / No arrangement of words whatever is ever going to make it work" After the second, on "the game of politics," Don, the ostensible audience, grows skeptical: "I am dumbstruck, I came all this way for this? What about the magic and the premonitions?" And if he thinks the lecturer "talks just like I do," it is probably because he is hallucinating the entire episode (this on top of the master plot in which he is dreaming it). It seems doubtful, at any rate, that he gets the enlightenment he is looking for—the lesson in how to live in "real time"—from the last lecturer, who, Ashley wrote, is "not well educated and defiant like the 'Commandante' of the Chiupas," nor "logical and persuasive like the legendary Ché Guevara," nor even "ironical like [Carlos] Castaneda's Don Juan. He's a screamer and the subject of his lecture is nothing less than the history of commercial civilization." Sam Ashley unleashes a torrent of sound in a cracked, wild voice, and the chorus' zombified refrains of

Example 9: Chart of the anticipated and repeated words in Scene Fourteen: “The Doctor (All Things Rolled Into One).” See <http://theofferingofimages.com/> for piece a real-time illustration of the process.

the **offering** of images as a spiritual activity
replaces the impulse to find a personal vision, an icon
as a spiritual activity it **distracts** the individual
from finding and recognizing a singular **true path**
the **offering** of images categorizes human activity and offers
the sum of the **categories** as a sum of possibilities and **alternatives**
each one of which must be equally good and equally valid,
else this system of categories **breaks down**
like modernism, science, and theatre **as we know it**,
the **offering** of images and protestantism hand in hand
are **egalitarian**, democratic and communistic
the **offering** of images is a secular spiritual activity
the **offering** of images has in our era attached itself as a spiritual
activity
to judaism as a **secular** corrective to mysticism and individualism
the **offering** of images is the **secularization** of judaism
as protestantism is the secularization of christianity,
modernism is the **secularization** of taste,
science is the secularization of **memory**,
and theatre as we know it is the secularization of **experience**
there are **other examples** but you get the idea
remember that we have yet to find a language that is common
to the occident and **orient**
except for the language of technology
consider then the difficulties in speaking to the **fourth world**,
the world of those who are **different**
for the difference that is independent of geography
for instance, the mentally **different**.
secularization must exclude the mentally **different** by definition.
the mentally **different** share no images with us
and they share no history with us.
the mentally **different** cannot be modern
the mentally **different** cannot be trusted in science
the mentally **different** cannot appreciate theatre as we know it
one supposed that other **differences** than mental difference
separate the **fourth world**
from the three that communicate with such difficulty now
for instance, feelings.
suppose for a moment that beginning **this instant**,
while nothing in you changes **mentally**,
you enter into a state of permanent **rapture**
[maybe not more intense than the feeling you feel while
standing in the meadow of your **imagination** and being addressed by
name,
without the **ambiguity** of distance
by some animate **being** or knowing system in an elevated position]

to simplify the image a **great deal** without changing it structurally,
but as intense and without the **incumbrance** of the image
I think this is what is meant by **pure bliss**
the feeling without the image
you could not be **modern**
you could not be **trusted in science**
you could not appreciate theatre as we know it
you would be in the same **relationship** to the **real worlds** one, two
and three
as if you were mentally **different**
and you would never be able to communicate to those worlds
that while intent upon a state of permanent **rapture** you are mentally
ok
you could do it by **reference** to the dream
but remember, you would not have had the **dream**
might not know what **dreams** were
and to try to communicate through the image of the **dream**
would reveal the passing nature of your **rapture**
the fourth world is **different** from the other three
otherwise we wouldn't need words at all,
and it is different in the words
now the problem you will have in dealing with your **dream**
as a **yardstick** in your life
is that it will fade
the greatest of the **prophets**, mooses, the first jew we can remember,
was very **discouraging** about the use of images
he thought that any attempt to animate the world in one's imagina-
tion,
to give it any meaning at all is a big mistake
if you **for instance** think of dogs as little
because they are **smaller** than you think **you are**
you have a long way to go before you rest
traditionally, when imagination becomes too strong,
cultures resort to very strong chemical treatments,
usually from the vegetable world,
to **burn off** the waste, which is where the **imagination** arises
i think you must do some of that
don't be **frightened** of the first stage,
in which the imagination is **purposely** inflamed
remember who you are stay near help and don't give up
eventually you will come to **pure bliss**
the image will disappear
dreams will stop
you won't need me

“Right On/ Well Said” could only be the reaction of an audience as mad as the lecturer.

If these stories of the monumental past keep imploding, perhaps this is simply because they are told by fools and madmen. Throughout the cycle there is a countervailing suggestion that with great themes come the greatest displays of virtuosity and eloquence in speech and song. The marriage sermon from *Perfect Lives*, in which the Justice of the Peace tells the history of civilization at dazzling speed, might be mentioned, but nowhere is this more in evidence than in Now Eleanor’s “Song of the Seven Ages of The Three Great Tribes,” a scene that seems to serve as the transcendent reversal of the previous, incoherent, sputtering performances, and that, moreover, has the special role of concluding the tetralogy and thus the entire cycle. As Now Eleanor, Joan La Barbara sings an improvised syllabic chant in A-flat Mixolydian mode with frequent pitch repetitions, delivering the words at a moderate pace. Accompanied by a pulsing, keening pitch, the song states its purpose at the very beginning:

The singing of the song must give form to
An unnamable reality —
That the Three Great Families, known to us only
As Past, a fiction of false language,
Continue in the present without change,
Except in manifest appearances.
And so the song must recount manifest
Appearances in the time of today.

Over the course of twenty-two minutes—the longest performance in any of the operas—Now Eleanor describes and, by doing so, apparently simultaneously enacts an increasingly elaborate ritual that includes seasonal rites with the lowriders and their cars, games of counting and naming, and an explication of “indexes” and “ingredients” comprising the ceremony. The texture grows thicker with the entrance of additional voices, an electronically processed chorus, and four electronic “patches,” all of which vaguely resemble car noises. Finally, the ritual song reaches its reflexive epicenter, a performance within the performance (within the real performance)—a recounting of the Seven Ages of the Three Families, beginning with the splintering of a primal unity, followed by the emergence of language, time, space, differentiation, up through an era of “pure multiplicity” known as the Sixth Age or “the present.” Despite Joan La Barbara’s consistently clear enunciation, by this point in the song some combination of its long duration (we are seventeen minutes in) and repetitive melodic and harmonic content has rendered the parable-esque language a meditative droning, in which the words are only partially or intermittently ascertained. The linguistic element further recedes as Now Eleanor, having received the stock accolade (“Well said”), breaks off her chanting for an ecstatic interlude, her voice intertwining with those of the Guardian Angel and Low Rider Double in streams of glissandos that at first sound wordless. In fact the trio is melismatically distending isolated bits of text drawn from a commentary on the Song that an electronically processed chorus has just begun to mechanically and almost incomprehensibly rattle off. After a brief return to Now Eleanor’s syllabic chant, the Song reprises the combination of trio and chorus in a haze of sound that seems to be in the midst of ushering in the apocalyptic Seventh Age before abruptly ending.

It is in all these attempts throughout the cycle to say the most momentous and “meaningful” things about the past that language is least effective as a vehicle of representation.

But if, in the scenes from *Improvement* and *Foreign Experiences*, the rift between sound and meaning transpired through linguistic performances that allegorized their own failure, in *Now Eleanor's Song* it seems to be the very movement by which language ascends to a state of sacred power. It is as if the past were borne along on the sonic surface of a ritual that renders anteriority illusory. Ashley's cycle makes these incommensurate conceptions of language—the one aporetically self-allegorizing, the other magically actualizing—appear as flip sides of the same antihistorical coin, two ways to experience the contraction of vast histories to the cusp of a droning present.

But isn't it a category mistake to place this magical reading on the same level as the deconstructive reading? In the latter case, Ashley's words were metareflexively doing what they were describing—in my interpretation, anyway—but *Now Eleanor's Song* is not, after all, in fact actualizing the Seven Ages of the Three Great Families. That is just the plot of the opera, and even that conceit is deflated by the story itself if we think back to the master plot in which *Now Eleanor's Song* is said to be nothing but the finale of a dream, the idealized mirror image of the mad lecture in *Foreign Experiences*. (There are also hints that the song's sensuous vocality is a kind of wish fulfillment: *Now Eleanor*, we have been told, adores opera singing.) But before entirely dispensing with the mystical as nothing but a theme or plot element, subordinate to the maneuvers of a self-deconstructing language, we might pursue the reflexive logic itself a step further. According to the second level of allegory proposed above, the "strong" performances and their embedded receptions allegorize the structure of the real performance situation. *Now Eleanor's song*, then, could be taken to allegorize the trilogy's ritualistic function in what should have been their actual medium: television. Ashley wrote that television is the quintessential medium of contemporary American ritual. On television, he imagined, his operas would be experienced as an unending accumulation of details, like soap operas on rerun, which already resemble, or are indifferent from those rituals of collective memory that give us a history.

Now Eleanor's Song, then, swerving back and forth between magical effect and self-deflation, encapsulates the profound ambivalence at the heart of the cycle's allegory of storytelling. What, it is finally posed directly, is the value of these rituals of memory transmission? Toward the very end of *Now Eleanor's song* the chorus mechanically jabbars:

Remembering is accumulation. It
Is not wisdom, unfortunately
What is "passed down" to us is memory.
Its value has yet to be determined.
It is passed down to us as obstruction.
A darkening of the sky at midday.
A multiplicity of ways to choose.
A lore of wisdom that is untested.
An accumulation of misjudgments.

While the trio wails, the chorus utters the last line in the cycle: "The Song must be sung with great clarity." It can almost be understood.

In Memoriam Robert Ashley (1930-2014)

NOTES

1 See Hayden White, “The Burden of History,” *History and Theory* 5 (2) (1966), 111-134. In his subsequent *Metahistory*, White describes the “numerous rebellions against historical consciousness in general which have marked the literature, social science, and philosophy of the twentieth century” as, in part, a legacy of the late-nineteenth century “Ironic” mode of historiography. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press: 1975), xii. For a critique of the anti-historical and anti-diachronic bent of New Critical, structuralist, and poststructuralist literary theory see Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

2 Pierre Boulez, “Sprengt die Opernhäuser in die Luft,” *Der Spiegel* 40 (September 25, 1967): 166-74. Translated in English: Pierre Boulez, “Opera Houses?—Blow Them Up!” *Opera*, June 1968.

3 In response to the incident, allegedly committed by a 26-year-old, homeless East German émigré who said he had wandered into the opera house in search food, Cage says: “Opera in the society is an ornament of the lives of the people who have. I don’t feel that so much with my work [*Européras 1 & 2*], but with more conventional operas, it’s clearly an ornament that has no necessary relation to the 20th century.” Leah Durner, “Past and Future in Cage’s *Européras 1 & 2*,” *EAR Magazine* 13 (2) (April 1988): 13. Quoted in: Herbert Lindenberger, “Regulated Anarchy: The *Européras* and the Aesthetics of Opera,” *John Cage: Composed in America*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 151. Details on the arson from: “Arson at the Frankfurt Opera,” *The New York Times*, November 13, 1987: A9.

4 James Pritchett argues that the *Européras* were a “celebration of opera, not a destruction of it.” James Pritchett, “*Européras 5*,” *John Cage – Européras 5* [CD] (New York: Mode Records, 1994). See also: Heinz-Klaus Metzger, “*Européras* Oper,” *Musik-Konzepte Sonderband John Cage II*, ed. Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn (Munich: Musik-Konzepte), 72-82; Heinz-Klaus Metzger, “Zu *Européras 1 & 2*. John Cage im Gespräch mit Heinz-Klaus Metzger und Rainer Riehn,” *Die Freigelassene Musik: Schriften zu John Cage*, ed. Rainer Riehn and Florian Neuner (Vienna: Klever Verlag, 2012), 169-177. For the most thorough work on Cage’s *Européras 1 & 2*, see: Laura D. Kuhn, “John Cage’s *Européras 1 & 2*: The Musical Means of Revolution,” Ph.D diss. (University of California, Los Angeles, 1992).

5 David W. Noble has chronicled American historians’ denigration of historicity in favor of a metaphysical romance with the space. See: David W. Noble, *Historians Against History: The Frontier Thesis and the National Covenant in American Historical Writing since 1830* (Minneapolis, MN: 1965); David W. Noble, *Death of a Nation: American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis, MN: 2002).

6 The old trope of America as a land without history, a realm of spatiality to Europe’s temporality, was still in force in the 1980s, as reflected in proclamations by thinkers as politically polarized as Francis Fukuyama and Jean Baudrillard. See: Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* (Summer 1989); Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 1989).

7 See, for example: Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988) – especially chapter 7, “Historiographic metafiction: ‘the pastime of past time’”. For a more wide-ranging discussion of the crisis in postmodern historicity, see: Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), especially, ix-xxii; 1-66.

8 K. Robert Schwarz, speaking at a 1995 roundtable discussion entitled “Remaking American Opera”, uses the term “rebirth.” Already in 1984, Schwarz’s fellow *New York Times* critic John Rockwell noted the unusual flurry of operatic activity in an article titled “New Opera is Thriving After Years of Neglect,” *New York Times*, August 5, 1984: H1.

9 In 1984 Opera America established its program “Opera for the Eighties and Beyond” (OFTEAB) and co-sponsored, with the Brooklyn Academy of Music, “New Visions in American Opera.”

10 Composers affiliated with strains of the avant-garde in the 1960s seem to have been less likely to use the word “opera” to describe their music theatrical work, and it is perhaps surprising that so many “downtown” and experimental composers embraced the term in the 1970s and 1980s. However, Philip Glass observes that *Einstein on the Beach* was “only technically an opera, because the only place you could do it was an opera house,” and initially expressed his preference for the label “music theater” because, he says, it signified a collaborative practice. Interview with John Koopman (1990) from *Writings on Glass*, 256. Philip Glass on Meet the Composer Radio Show—Interview with Tim Page, WNYC 1985. There was in fact a concerted push for “music theater” in the 1970s and early 1980s. In 1983, Eric Salzman and Marjorie Samoff founded the American Music Theater Festival in Philadelphia. See: Eric Salzman, “Whither American Music Theater,” *Musical Quarterly* 65 (2) 1979.

11 John Adams, *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), 100-105.

12 The context for Davis’ statement was the occasional application of the label “jazz opera” to his work. That phrase, he stated, reflects the endemic tendency of the American cultural establishment to relegate creative endeavors by black composers to a low status no matter what the content: “If people go expecting to see a jazz opera, they’re going to be disappointed—only about 1 percent is improvised. This is a *real* opera. Implicit in the term ‘jazz opera’ is an attempt to label the work away—to say it’s not serious, not to be compared with other American operas.” In: John Rockwell, “Malcolm X – Hero to Some, Racist to Others – Is Now The Stuff of Opera.” *New York Times*, September 28, 1986, H1. Davis went so far as to contractually prohibit the use of the word “jazz” by any prospective producing organizations. The contractual ban on the use of jazz can be found in the American International Artists Management production contract for *X*. Rhoda Levine Papers at the New York Public Library, Box 61, file 1.

13 For two interpretations of what I call a “musealizing turn” in culture see: Pierre Nora, “The Era of Commemoration,” *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, volume III: Symbols, ed. Pierre Nora, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press), 609-637; Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

14 For a very different interpretation of the televisual in Adams’s *Nixon in China*, see: Peggy Kamuf, “The Replay’s the Thing,” *Opera Through Other Eyes*, ed. David J. Levin (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 79-106.

15 Jameson’s statement, the opening of his book on postmodernism, reads: “It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place.” Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

16 I have never been interested in mundane politics as a subject for opera. That is, international politics or famous ‘issues,’ which seem always to involve people who are forced by public opinion to behave in devious or dishonest ways. Or are simply evil. Television takes care of that in our societyAfter the ONCE Group and on my own for the first time the operas became about ‘ordinary’ people. No celebrities, except imaginary ones.” Robert Ashley, “Some Characteristics of My Music,” *Outside of Time: Ideas About Music*. (Köln: Musiktexte, 2009), 92.

17 Ashley, “And so it Goes, Depending,” *Outside of Time*, 228.

18 In a 1991 interview with Kyle Gann, Ashley said: “I put my pieces in television format because I believe that’s really the only possibility for music. But I don’t believe that this recent fashion of American composers trying to imitate stage opera from Europe means anything. It’s not going to go anywhere. We don’t have any tradition.” Kyle Gann, “Shouting at the Dead,” *Village Voice* 36 (41) (October 8, 1991), 89. Quoted in: Kyle Gann, *Robert Ashley* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 2.

19 Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2003 [1977, original edition as *Essays on Performance Theory*]), 29.

20 “I like the feeling of first decisions, unreconsidered, un‘cut.’...In television only the awesome power of our fascination with ‘sports’ has held back the death grip of the film mentality The fact is: real-time is more difficult (read: ‘money’). But the evidence is that real-time is the greatness of television.” Ashley, “And so it Goes, Depending,” *Outside of Time*, 236.

21 Ashley, “A Kind of History of America—A Grand Opera Tetralogy,” *Outside of Time*, 292.

22 See also: Robert Ashley, “Robert Ashley Talks About Perfect Lives,” *Perfect Lives: an Opera* (Champaign, IL, Dublin, London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011 [1991]), 152-53.

23 I borrow the phrase “rehabilitation of allegory” from a section in Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (second, revised edition), (London and New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 1989/2004), 61-70. For a characterization of allegory as the basic principle of representation (quite representative of much critical discourse in the 1970s and 1980s) see: Stephen Greenblatt, “Introduction,” *Allegory and Representation: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1979-80*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press), vii-xii.

24 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 30. “It was only now that the temporal distance that separated each individual mass from the Last Supper as its point of reference began to turn into an unbridgeable ‘historical distance,’ and here we begin to understand that a connection exists between the emerging, specifically modern conception of signification and the dimension of historicity—as a conquest of modernity. For in modern understanding, signs at least potentially leave the substances that they evoke at a temporal and spatial distance.” Gumbrecht does not in fact use the term “allegorical,” but his description of the “modern conception of signification” accords with how theorists since the nineteenth century have discussed allegorical signification.

25 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York and London: Verso/New Left Books), *passim*, but see, for example, 166.

26 In fact, in a bit of historical irony, all that the Romantics had claimed for the “symbol”—translucence (Coleridge’s term), immediacy, immanence—and which they had opposed to the mechanical artifice of allegory, had been derived from an older allegorical tradition rooted in Neoplatonism. In this tradition, the emblem is not the signifier that “stands for” another thing, but a piece of a great interconnected cosmos—part of a “tiered ontology,” in the words of Peter T. Struck—in which all things radiate out of the “One.” See: Peter T. Struck, “Allegory and Ascent in Neoplatonism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, ed. Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 59. See also: Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck, “Introduction” in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, 1-11, especially 9.

27 I borrow the phrase from Paul Ricoeur: “In its declarative phase, memory enters into the region of lan-

guage . . .” Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 129.

28 “Around Morton Feldman” – Interview by Robert Ashley 1963.

29 Ashley, “Stories from Real Life – Music with ‘Characters,’” *Outside of Time*, 154.

30 Ashley, “Robert Ashley Talks About Perfect Lives,” 184.

31 Ashley “Stories from Real Life,” 154.

32 Radio Interview with Robert Ashley and Mimi Johnson, December 4, 1979. http://www.publicradio.org/tools/media/player/musicmavericks/archive_ashley

33 Robert Ashley, *Automatic Writing* [CD liner notes] (New York: Lovely Music, Ltd., 1996 [1979]).

34 In fact, Ashley first began to develop the material that became *Private Parts* as a script for a friend’s film project (a modern version of *The Wizard of Oz*). Eventually, the plan for the movie was abandoned, and Ashley used some of the writing he had generated for the recording of *Private Parts*. Interview with Robert Ashley, September 13, 2012, New York City.

35 Ashley, “Talks About Perfect Lives,” *Perfect Lives*, 149.

36 Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 178.

37 Ashley used the phrase “personality habits” in the September 2012 interview. There is, perhaps, a deeper and stranger aspect of Ashley’s anti-essentialist conception of personality than that implicit in the idea of “personality habits.” This follows from his views on the significance of involuntary acts. On the one hand, involuntary acts as manifest in a set of “personality habits” are the characteristics that make an individual unique. They “belong” to that person, even if they are bound up with performance and artifice. On the other hand, involuntary acts such as those channeled in *Automatic Writing* seem to rupture the bonds of identity: it is as if they come from nowhere, or somewhere outside one’s own self. In this respect the deep influence of Julian Jaynes’ 1976 study, *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, on Ashley’s work should be mentioned. Jaynes contends that “consciousness” as such developed much later in human history than generally believed. In Jaynes’ telling, consciousness, before it could be assimilated, announced itself to humankind as directives and admonishments perceived as if coming from elsewhere—from what humans took to be the mouths of the gods.

38 In the 1979 radio interview Ashley says of the performance on *Private Parts*: “I wrote the text and I tried a lot of different ways of saying it. The only one that I could really control, feel that I was participating in musically, that I wasn’t being taken over by some cultural idea, was that very monochromatic one, where there’s a monotone.”

39 As an example of the longevity of these tropes in his performance, numerous echoes can be found in phrasing between *Perfect Lives* and one of Ashley’s most recent completed operas, *Dust* (1998): (“It could be different . . . she thinks” [*Perfect Lives*]; “Now most of my friends could fix it up . . . you think”) [*Dust*]; (“preferring in this case . . . earth” [*Perfect Lives*]; “Now that’s what I call . . . short” [*Dust*]).

40 Interview September 2012: “So if you just keep doing it, it becomes funny. I don’t know how to say it. If you just keep doing it, obviously you’re telling jokes—you’re making jokes for your friends in the band. You’re making jokes that *they* understand that the audience would not understand. You’re also working with people . . .

.You know Peter Gordon is an *amazingly* funny guy, oh beautiful brilliant guy. And Paul Shore, just a brilliantly funny guy. So you get funny, because you're dealing with these guys who are lighthearted, you know? If you were with somebody more serious you'd probably go the other way. But when I'm working with Peter, and then with Paul Shore, and then with Tom Hamilton – you know, you gotta be lighthearted."

41 In an email correspondence, in which Ashley clarified the basic collaborative procedures used in *Perfect Lives* summarized above, Ashley adds: "This kind of collaboration is absolutely standard practice in the popular music world. There is not an exception to this way of working. But it had not, to my knowledge, been done in any way in the "avant-garde" music I seemed to represent . . . (You can understand, too, that this is a more "expensive" way of working than just writing everything down in advance and hoping it is good. But I put it in the budget for *Perfect Lives* because I knew that was the way the opera had to be made.) . . . I'm not trying just to claim some part of the composing process that I didn't do. I just want readers to understand. I want them to understand the idea of a way of working, which is sadly neglected in the world I work in now. The idea is important because (1) it is an up-to-date way of doing things — which is important to me — and (2) it's unique to *Perfect Lives*. And in a deep sense it's the way I've been composing throughout my career. The ONCE Group pieces come from that way of working. *Atalanta (Acts of God)* was almost entirely presented to the audience in that way of working. And the *Now Eleanor's Idea* set of operas used a lot of that way of working, even though I decided to compose more of the details of those operas myself because the ideas for the scores are complicated and because I could never have afforded to work in another way."

42 Ashley, "And so it Goes, Depending," *Outside of Time*, 228.

43 Kyle Gann points out that Ashley makes "a distinction between plot and storytelling," and quotes the composer: "At the opera I am transported to a place and time where there is no disorder. There is disorder on stage, and it is called melodrama. We don't believe it. This is important: that we don't believe it. We do believe . . . what happens in the movies . . . Therefore, opera can have no plot. It is foolish to argue that opera—any opera—can have a plot; that is, that the 'characters' and their apparent 'actions' and the apparent 'consequences' are related in any way. Opera can be story-telling only. That the story-telling happens on stage and that musicians are making music in the pit (to reinforce the story told) is entirely coincidental. That story might as well be told at the kitchen table with a crazy aunt and uncle as the soprano and tenor." Ashley, "A New Kind of Opera – Contemporary Opera in the United States," *Outside of Time*, 136. Quoted in: Gann, *Robert Ashley*, 58.

44 The last opera of the tetralogy, *Now Eleanor's Idea*, is a notable exception.

45 Ashley, "A New Kind of Opera – Contemporary Opera in the United States," *Outside of Time*, 134.

46 For more details see: Ashley, "Robert Ashley Talks About *Perfect Lives*," 176-77.

47 "The four dreams are coincidental. That is, they are running at the same time and they arise from, or are governed by, the same external circumstances—which we cannot interpret, except indirectly: for instance, external sounds." Ashley, "Robert Ashley Talks About *Perfect Lives*," 178.

48 *Ibid.*, 177.

49 Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse" [part 1], 72. Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 295. The use of dreams and visions as a frame is in fact a classic allegorical technique. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is one notable example.

50 Paul de Man, for example, observes that allegory is "sequential and narrative, yet the topic of its narration is not necessarily temporal at all." Paul de Man, "Pascal's Allegory of Persuasion," *Allegory and Representation*, 1.

51 “The Magic of Collaboration – *PERFECT LIVES* and the ‘Template,’” *Outside of Time*, 255-56. Ashley further explains: “Within each of these sections the template of the whole opera is reproduced in a subdivision of the total number of beats in the section: for example, Episode One has two long sections of approximately the same number of beats, followed by a brief ‘coda’ of a much smaller number of beats; within the two larger sections and within the coda the template of the whole opera—with its changes from monologue to dialogue to chorus, et cetera—is reproduced, measured in pure duration, down to one sixty-fourth of a beat. In other words, while the number of beats within a section changes from section to section, the proportions of the whole opera are reproduced within the section.” (266).

52 Gann gives the meters and provides details: The Park – 13 (8+5); The Supermarket – 5; The Bank – 9 (5 + 4, 4 + 5, alternating when the narrative jumps to the future); 7 (4 + 3, 3 + 4, depending on whether Buddy or Raoul is speaking); The Living Room – 4 (in triplets); The Church – 4; The Backyard – triplet in 5- and 4-beat lines. See: Gann, *Robert Ashley*, 62-63.

53 “Robert Ashley Talks About *Perfect Lives*,” 162 [emphasis Ashley’s].

54 Kyle Gann, “Foreword,” *Perfect Lives*, xiii.

55 I owe this last insight to Arman Schwartz. Once again, Benjamin’s figure of the fragment-piling allegorist might be invoked. The full quotation excerpted above reads: “For it is common practice in the literature of the baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, and, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to take the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification.” [emphasis mine] Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 178.

56 Elsewhere Ashley wrote: “There are a number of subplots, barely explained, to show who the entertainers are and where they come from, but the stories are simply the stories the characters tell to entertain ‘The Odalisque.’ So the opera is not about revolution or falling hopelessly in love or revenge or whatever. It is ‘about’ showing off. Showing off by telling stories in an unusual and musical way.” Ashley, “A New Kind of Opera – Contemporary Opera in the United States,” *Outside of Time*, 134-136.

57 Robert Ashley, “The Afterword,” *Atalanta (Acts of God)*, (Santa Fe, NM: Burning Books, 2011), 195.

58 This is given its greatest elaboration in the video trailer *Atalanta Strategy*. Robert Ashley and Lawrence Brickman, *Atalanta Strategy* [VHS], (New York, NY: Lovely Music, 1986).

59 Each “Anecdote with Admonition and Song,” for example, is summarized in a corresponding “Headlines” section, while the “Gossip” sections combine chopped-up passages from other stories with new material in narrower stanzas of three-to-five syllables.

60 Ashley, “The Afterword,” 195.

61 *Ibid.*, 192.

62 *Ibid.*, 197.

63 The technique is borrowed from pop music where it is used to produce a richer vocal sound. Some of the time this is the effect achieved in *Improvement*, but because the vocal part often has a quasi-spoken quality and does not follow a precise arrangement of pitches and rhythms it would be nearly impossible for Humbert to sing a line the

same way twice.

64 Gann, *Robert Ashley*, 96.

65 For a brilliant, somewhat Benjaminian reading of eschatological allegory in Ashley's tetralogy see: Tyrus Miller, "The 'Approach-of-the-End-of-the-World' Feeling: Allegory and Eschatology in the Operas of Robert Ashley," *Ars Aeterna. Unfolding the Baroque: Cultures and Concepts* 2 (1) (Nitra, Slovakia: Constantine the Philosopher University, 2010): 40-51.

66 Ashley, "And so it Goes, Depending," *Outside of Time*, 236. See end note 21 for Ashley's statement.

67 Ashley, "Variations on the 'Drone': A Non-timeline Concept," *Outside of Time*, 124. Here Ashley defines timeline music as follows: "I mean music having any number of parts, a piano score or an orchestral score, that are coordinated by bar lines. This music must, by definition, be 'linear.' / The composer thinks about timeline music as a continuous, linear succession of events. This manner of thinking precludes any possibility that the music will be, for the purposes of theory, 'timeless' (outside of the timeline, outside of 'eventfulness' as the most important element) or just unpredictable." (114). See also: Ashley's essay on Phill Niblock's music in: Phill Niblock, *Disseminate* [CD] (New York: Mode Records, 2004).

68 See Book XI of Augustine's *Confessions*, especially the passage beginning: "Now consider the case of another voice. This voice begins to sound; it still goes on sounding; it sounds at the same pitch continuously with no variation." Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin, 1963), 279. See Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, ed. Martin Heidegger, trans. James S. Churchill (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1964).

69 The Romantics—notably Goethe and Coleridge—famously found the mechanistic and arbitrary character of allegorical signification wanting in comparison with the supposedly instantaneous identification of meaning and sign found in the "symbol." This critique of allegory had a long afterlife. Adorno, for example, attacks the "allegorical character of [Wagner's] leitmotifs," for their purely "external" artificiality, and the related "rescinding of temporal flow" on the "macrolevel" and "rigid stasis" in the "details" of Wagner's music. (At the same time, Adorno attacks the "hackneyed concept of the symbol" so dear to "orthodox Wagnerian scholars.") Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. (London and New York: Verso/New Left Books) 34-45. For the most influential defenses of allegorical temporality, see: Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*; Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," *Blindness and Insight* (Second Edition, Revised) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 187-228; Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979).

70 Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 202.

71 "Allegory does not accept doubt; its enigmas show instead an obsessive battling with doubt. It does not accept the world of experience and the senses; it thrives on their overthrow, replacing them with ideas. In these ways allegory departs from mimesis and myth, and its intention in either case seems to be a matter of clearly rationalized 'allegorical levels of meaning.' These levels are the double aim of the aesthetic surface; they are its intention, and its ritualized form is intended to elicit from the reader some sort of exegetical response. Whereas a simple story may remain inscrutable to the sophisticated reader, and a myth inscrutable to any reader at all, the correspondences of allegory are open to any who have a decoder's skill." Fletcher, *Allegory*, 324-325.

72 In his discussion of allegory's "ritual form" and "ritualistic rhythms" Fletcher observes that these would seem to induce a "kinesthetic" and "physical response," that one might become "anesthetized by the monotony." The "hypnotic" effect, he concludes, might not be unlike that of "listening to a bolero or a fandango." "But," he continues, "if one thinks of ritual in conceptual terms, which indeed allegory requires, one finds, I expect, a more coolly

rational sort of response in the reader. The ritual imposes such order on movement that it in effect communicates a sense of plan, of metric design, of formula.” (178) In short, Fletcher does not so much suppress the sensory dimension of ritual form as distinguish it from its properly allegorical function as code. Indeed, he writes: “While the order of a ritual is always capable of acting on the cognitive level as a species of code, so that the reader tries to decode its allegorical meaning, on the emotive level such codes are highly charged by their very form.” (208) Fletcher, *Allegory*, 178, 208.

“The obstacle of meaning and intrigue loses its weight, and both operatic plot and operatic language follow their course without encountering any resistance, issuing finally into banality. With the disappearance of the obstacle the soul of the work, mourning, also disappears, and just as the dramatic structure is emptied, so too is the scenic structure, which looks elsewhere for its justification, now that allegory, where it is not omitted, has become a hollow façade.” Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 212-213.

73 *Ibid.*, 207. “In the anagrams, the onomatopoeic phrases, and many other examples of linguistic virtuosity, word, syllable, and sound are emancipated from any context of traditional meaning and are flaunted as objects which can be exploited for allegorical purposes. The language of the baroque is constantly convulsed by rebellion on the part of the elements which make it up.” On the next page, Benjamin writes: “In its individual parts fragmented language has ceased merely to serve the process of communication, and as a new-born object acquires a dignity equal to that of gods, rivers, virtues and similar natural forms which fuse into the allegorical.” (208)

74 *Ibid.*, 201.

75 Benjamin continues: “The antithesis of sound and meaning could not but be at its most intense where both could be successfully combined in *one* [in the spoken word], without their actually cohering in the sense of forming an organic linguistic structure.” *Ibid.*, 209.

76 *Ibid.*, 211; 212-213.

77 Gann, “Foreword,” *Perfect Lives*, xvi.

78 It is in those moments in which semantic meaning is most obscured (considered at length in the next section) that we best understand the dual temporality of the “drone,” which is to say, its mediation between the present and the atemporal. On the one hand, the intonational modulations and rhythmic fluctuations that form the seemingly endless stream of words begin to strike the listener as if they were nothing but the roiling surface of a massive sea, the underlying currents of which move slowly (to adopt a Braudelian image). Given a certain cumulative, dazed inattention, the whole soundworld seems almost static. On the other hand, the sonic interest of Ashley’s operas lies in these very vocal nuances. We find ourselves drawn “into” them. Semantic reference is suspended between these poles (which, nevertheless, somehow fold in upon each other). We are either too far away, as it were, on a kind of supralinguistic trance-like plane, or too focused in on the sublinguistic minutiae of vocal articulations.

79 De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 275.

80 See especially the second chapter of *Allegories of Reading*: “Tropes (Rilke),” 20-56. Frederic Jameson remarks that “DeMan’s work is unique among that of modern critics and theorists in its ascetic repudiation of pleasure, desire, and the intoxication of the sensory.” Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 254.

81 I’ve taken this section title from Alexander Kluge’s 1985 film *Der Angriff der Gegenwart auf die übrige Zeit*.

82 De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 205.

Contrapuncti

Tamas Panitz

1.

I steal everything. I steal and find the unchanging roots of water. I founder them. I plash my big leaves on the surface. I plash them below, all the way down past you. I plash them because you can feel my plashing. How did I get there? There you call it, because I've always been here— it's you who got Here. Maybe you're the first. Does it matter? Sometimes you want it that way. But do you desire it? Desires are worse than opinions. Desires are lies you believe. I am the relief of desire. That doesn't stop you.

My leaves plash animals from divers depths. They are many and they are me, more or less pronounced, telling more or less the same story. Because I'm not going to tell a story. I don't want to tell a story, I want to plash my elephantine leaves and watch your amazement.

But what can you do? That's the problem. You do what I do but if you get too close you are relieved. I am relief. I am the berth of animals, of desire, and the relief of desire. I want you to be amazed at me. Amazed at you. You love to be amazed at you. You keep the distance of beasts.

2.

I'm the problem. Solve for X: that's me. Jimmied through everything I'm not. Because I'm you. I am the counterbalance, a wailing upon the blasts at Lusignan, an imposter stinking in the woods. A bath you took once. The sky in a puddle. You betray me.

3.

You magre me. Wrong. To be you is wrong. The world misfortunes unto you. You devil. You vinegar. You illicit salt. The King of May and the Winter King. *Another//yearning/philosopher*. You mock from the ends of dispersion. This bell shaped memory in my monocot hands. You sham in the distant tower. You spell.

4.

You face mad directions from the verdurous watch. You look with amaze at cow-sheds so near. In so dear a distance. The silos impose a Wonder Castle in this sensuous alchemy. You remember. You grunt the stob. You call an unseen answer from near. I cantus firmus. You wake with the taste of me. They bury you with me in your hands.

5.

This is you talking. Swift glance short stride. Sometimes you confuse yourself with the river. Half-dance. And are bewildered the music goes on without. Shame of the animal. You subtle sin. You're the think of things, whose desire is its sensuous reminder: touch me. You are the sin of the world. An atonement.

6.

Plunge the one armed scale of the obvious. You language time away. Your whole life light as my waxy leaves. *Here the meanings linger.* Immense subjects vie vibrance yearning your little mouth. Howl of seeds on the wind warmed by the throats of wolves. Your breath a city falling through the hills.

7.

I don't know. I know only what desire knows and desire knows not what it does. You don't know. No one knows. Matter is what happens. Your other pair of hands. That endless creation, knowing so much more about you. Reminders sly in *Mitsein*. Consuls who trip you at night.

8.

Florid map a single touch opens great circuits you spend your life wandering. Green eyed people familiar in leopard dark. How is it you can have whatever you want? Want comes from the silence you ingratiating howl. It's you the silence wants, I want. Telescopic rings litter the ground around you. You strut from peak to peak.

9.

You tread the crests of my shuddering revolutions. Through lives. Through memories. You are what's memorable. Shimmering Japanese exaggeration. A standing animal. Tip-toe, your step is the nexus. Trill across the tree tops. Every footprint is the palm of my hand. Star shimmy along the sky of wood.

10.

I was you then. I'm always you then. I'm your memory and the weight of your whole life balances gracefully on the surface of my leaves. Then you picked me up and noticed I was a street, and you could almost remember the people there. You walk the thousand streets of my veins and think of other things.

11.

You walk a thousand steps to my beat holy policeman of the *grundrisse*. Light as the dead who else could need to go somewhere. Cadaver of cadence glutes linear Blake knew. Levity of your figure firming in air.

12.

All yearning surfaces on you. I am yearning. Old man you chase up the hill. And suddenly sleepy there's only me left. The long grass nuzzling your thighs. I am relieved in your rest. I am what it means to be supine. Thousand little hands of dream, trying to pull you back. I am resolution. I refuse to be unsolved.

13.

Every motion glories in me. I live in the seal of your heart. I am your heart and the steep of symbols. I follow the sun with a thousand heads. You presume me, and follow your own tracks.

14.

Desire was a mistake. Where I went you wrong. Only answering that do we know what calls both. What calls us both? You think three times. You pile shore upon shore upon shore to forestall the drift of my knowing better. You slash at the river. The sky winces a draft across your persistent wrongness. You deny me and lie. It's so hard to believe in things. You chase. You tire. You fulfill the conditions a contrariety despite yourself. Dancing among the loose strife, you stumble on the rocks where the river runs under. You deny the rocks. You lie.

15.

You stumble. The music swings by identical with pain. It's motion that haunts you. You triumph over motion itself. I am motion. You out-pain me. My incubation was your desperate glance. I grew through the sea from your wild cries at the dream of water. You work along the cliffs one foot astray. You slip into my step & cry out. My voice is silent without you. You break the music and that is music. I am the hurt you wound yourself on. The music is my voice is you says come heal me. Be me again.

16.

I am the rock of hurt. Stone shoulder of the sea. I am the pain of your denial, fool predisposition in the age of Joy. Yes, joy is a thing too, a subject. Thing you snatch out of the air, snatches you. I am joy. I offer myself up to your breath. Can't you remember? Since the beginning, a city, taught on your skin. This vast pleasure you learn the hard way.

17.

You is a seal. A blue door. *Vomit of the right combinations* they called my plashing. The fountains jet through you and collapse in the air. You are the myth of headwaters. Myth of end. Seal of kinesis: your dividend of everything.

18.

Pears or infinity, peras apeiron. They are infinity. You make the sign. You live at 28 Union Street on the third floor. Behind the numbers you glide unaltered. Lover on a broken road. Or so you think. Harmony caresses you like a foreign priest. *Little bird, sleep in me, there is no first person plural in my language.* The pear propounds you and opens onto the sky. I am harmony. I am things. I am never coming back again you say. My motion moves you that is the only law. I am the fruit of everything you do. Tree ringed tight around you *o sky you say walk right through the door you are* little bird I sleep in everything you mean.

19.

You break every rock and propound the horizon of my roar. You live a purgation where I survive casually. You live interminably among the details I am. You cannot fathom my continuance. I sink an iron root. I fathom. I am the fall of first depths. I grow downward with your pursuant heavens.

20.

I should hate you. Object of my affections you jilt me running straight into my arms. You tire yourself into the long dureé of my will. You perform amazing dances of my eagerness. You continue to inform me from a long forgotten impetus. You forget your message and bear me to me instead. You forget and arrive foot lighter than step.

21.

You swagger into my coup. You challenge death on the way to death. You forget and return to me. You forget and live amazed at my simple knowledges. You try flashing ones and zeros over the calm of my suspensions. I am the end of ends and the sinking bottom. I am the punctum of immeasurable depths and the pouring out of life sweet orbital. You know me self reflexively deja vu is my doorstep.

22.

I am the sex of everything. You pompous fool the symbols explode at your hasty difference. But you too are a subject and a disappointed god. You cast your shadow down startled to see it crawl away.

23.

The grass is sweet and grass is not not grass the heat of my need trembles even in your havens I am offered in your making. Crafty alembic the forms of your content cast forth my name. You navigate by my constellations, earth returning to earth. Your temples offer me to myself and become obsolete. There is only ever another final city. You let your blood inward rebuild.

24.

The rhythm of disclosures in the focus of your hands, cupped pelvic bowl, the sun rolls into the depths of the orb (any orb, even itself) the sentence is lost and known surely as tongue knows its root way down. You try to speak and say me, word only you can. You try to speak in so little difference between us. You hand me over and I live in you. I am your most opulent gift. Your willful motion is my name and I stretch to anchor deeper new constellations of your invention. You try to say something else. But not even you can defy your place. You are still you, squeamish universe plummeting through galaxies. You pull a face and it gets stuck that way. You flee across me like a broken Prometheus.

25.

Your blue shadow on the white stone. Carved wild donkeys protect the dead. You know enough to cast a shadow, to see the animals hid searing there. You know nothing of death. You know what's clamoring in from the dark of you. The red gazelles from the red stone. Green snake of the blue stone. Blue shadow on the black. How stones speak when you address them, and their clatter is the voice of the sun. I call your name with a thousand voices. You listen them. Blue them on the white. Red. Blue. You know at least this much and thrill to their seemingly exotic sounds.

26.

Seemingly exotic the beasts prance defiant imaginations you push the pen out, scratch from yourself. Scratch yourself on the shadows. Beasts half-dance in the sentence. Your apparition above my foreground. Green snake that is a scratched man.

27.

You wander blindly in the language of my exposition. You wander the streets and are my exposition. You see only you and my disagreement in your exposition of me. I have made up my mind not to be anything partial. Your exposition of broken houses and trampled flowers and things as they are my harmonious instruction.

28.

Chair you never dared call an angel. Rain driving out final cold another final city. Another chance to sit in material resolution. Another call to desire the resolution of your problematic will. The music says stay forever. You sit down and stand again. Half-dance.

29.

You are the problem. How to resolve and stay resolved? You look too long at the sea. I plash the leaves of your discord. You break off and are suddenly set against. To cast your shadow over everything again. Rock by rock, lifetime by lifetime. Your shadow swaggers discriminating across my paper hands. Berths employ your attention briefly. Too much attention and they are lost and. The sentence vanishes below zero. And on individual fenceposts. And you rest. Get up again. And the final city has memory. And remembers you you remember this familiar step and on the cusp of forgetting. Familiar temple the same temple you rebuild. And this awaited now. And words waiting all this time. And your shadow falls a day in the troughs. And you say too much there is no measure but your sensuous appraisal. And the chance of you rogue in the forest of events. And you happen to alight. And you forge my history. And you peer down from the crests at my paper engines. My history is a forgery and I fall iron from your dream.

31.

And last night Olson confessed, *I cannot bear to make eggs alone*, and you agreed, that's your problem too. The wilderness of your motions curbed by this law.

32.

Your acts are a difficulty and nothing to do with themselves. You drag your sword through the stream. You act in false colors. But are right to act. You put your hand in the fire. You learn to let me speak. You bear my mark. Your memory is magic and a living history your crook eye sees around corners. You know the continuity of total fecklessness. You gourmandize. You indulge.

33.

The line is a murmur of starlings, black articulations tossed up to where. What's so great about you. Another unreadable constellation. Articulate among everything articulate else all and none of it and yet you step forward. You defy your own laws in meaningful defiance. Your infidelity heart-drill on the firmus of my formants. Black birds in a black sky. The wind tickles a word deeper than the wind in the ear of the sky your in-breath. Did you hear it?

34.

You crest the long waves. You star oil. Cinnabar, sunset on the wave tips. Your meaningful defiance atop my bottomless drifts. I tow and you go up and down. I swing my leaves and am the current of my medium you buoy with mysterious pep. Walk in the richness of the undone, nowhere. You terse luster. You jive bugle.

35.

This time. This one. I watch with amaze all you can do and still be you. The animals file through the voice language their sex the incision. Their voices resound with this wound. Rocks hide in the diversion of your hullabaloo. You noisy receptivity. The gunpowder secret you forgot is the saloon you walk through. Begin here. Return here. Black powder at the end of sight. Solve for me. *Salva me!* Understand me, salve me with your sleep.

36.

A bell in a box. You rest. You swell against the four directions. Enter the high house you are. The curve runs off. Out. New walls erupt run aground. You bang your hip on the edge of the desk. You run out of the temple. That is the temple. Four doors. You flee down the barrel of your acts.

KATA TES PSUXES TETAKTAI the spirit against the soul, tactile evacuation you go right against your wrongness. Your chthonic center is a tree lurches toward you crow on the roadside you obsess your way through the palatial underbrush.

37.

You check the sky knowing nothing of stars. Stars mean here. You obsess over here and write me instead. The jib swings wide onto all that surrounds. The world swings wide and wonders at you. The low flying birds terrify you with their possibility. I read your fateless palms. Your containments spill into me. To the ends of sound. The ground burns with your reverberant acts. I remember you completely. I eat your sequence I don't believe in sequence you say. You perform great acts knowing nothing of stars. Your footsteps swinging doors you go blithely in and out. You progress in the divisible stillness of your motions. You progress still hoodwinked by meaningless traverses.

38.

Daffodil sleeping on your new formed knee innocent as spring in the city death birth no time between there's no weather here just postcards single frame the same sun beating through all the leaves.

39.

String with the wisdom of a voice. Umbrageous polemic your thread of the braid. String hoisting up, not body but inside. You where my voice lives. And you, and you with the whistling teeth, and you with no voice. You hear me out. You listen me out loud. You sing me sing each other my wisdom the reeds sink deep in your little raft.

40.

The guilt, not the guilt the ghost that ever *modus vivendi* you were you there is always this fact you stand accusing, reverberant, a third thing (assuming you're me again) changeful as death. Shadow among the baobabs. I seed, I grow, I wilt in your hands. You tread the seasons. You live among the beauties that are my return. You guilt me with this distance. Your ghost leads you through the false feet of my tracks.

41.

I can't even remember what you do. Only this ghost. How else reveal you, reveal me. Who but you, the blue thread in all your lives, the sea I'm in. Who else could be so wise with my currents. Who else could haunt me with its genuine mystery.

42.

It was your perfidious desire to know. What was already there. What I am. You were. You had to go find it. To then remember. Why did this happen. Why two gates: why does the vertical have to go up or down. You look back at me from the moon. I lift my thousand querulous hands. You live a thousand lives of my asking. I ask and ask and you taunt me with possibility.

43.

You taunt me with ascension. Less me more you. You shed my elements only to find them there. Wherever you're looking. You move through it all, one at a time. You feel the whole world saying inside you. You call this a hunch. You go with great pomp to discover the obvious. You're only great when you forget.

44.

Your thoughts are second thoughts. You struggle against the waves. Foolish as Tannhäuser. You deny me with praise. You make a pretentious mess. You make a stand for technicalities. It all ends the same. You come to me the hard way. You deny my love. You forget my name. You die hysterical for resolution. You absolve me. How many times do I have to say it? How many times must there be a you? Wasn't everything enough, before making it all again?

45.

You dirty yourself with me. You descend, fantasizing of martyrdom. You grovel in denials. You think someone lies in wait for your egg. Therefore they do.

46.

You begin at my end. My end is a wound. Identical launches of your identity. O we might think of Deleuze but what good would that do? The sentence murmurs on. You disappear for a while.

47.

I leave off where you begin. Nipped in the bud isn't that what a seed is you unravel this forever. Rest on the sufficiency I am. Matter supports you. Oops.

48.

April hail you pummel my newest shoots. Why should I talk about you? Everyone thinks I'm talking about them. You are all you can understand, violent, unseasonable. Just imagine what else I have to say.

49.

I can hardly remember how it is. How I'm everything. How you're writing this. It's exhausting to be so much more than you. Not to be something else for a while. Tell you about the rain on the boardwalk and an old man watching the sea. It's boring. To be the sea watching just one man. I splash my leaves and become something else.

50.

My totality is right. I return without turning. I am everywhere one direction. Everywhere not you. You walk off with all the wisdom of the world. You explore the local climes. *You* go away. This way.

51.

You know only a rhythm. Pace of necessity. Strides long as the grass. Short as they mean.

52.

You take elevators and dumbwaiters. You go up and down. Still you. You're the only chief I know, whoever you are. Fallen into my hands. Laying on the grass. You come from the hidden ones. You come from all I do.

53.

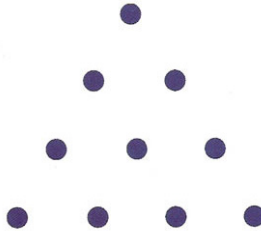
You retain this initial confusion. Tending toward me. Becoming specified. Expert by evening. You are always this. Left. Right. The ground behind you changes. Changes to the front. I am the trough between any two things. Between the many. Your know-it-all footsteps shiver across the candles.

54.

My leaves splash and you romp in cones of shadow. You unmarried. You do two contrary things. You can't look at yourself. You unmarried me and become and become two things. You walk along the shore its cliffs the redoubled sound. Your footsteps roar in your ears. You decide to follow.

55.

The way a clearing opens you expand suddenly. Your footsteps are expansions you walk all day walk on echoes at night. You walk on poles toward this initial confusion.



Music is full of incident.

Λ

Mostly, it's treated as an element to be framed-out of the experience: someone coughs during a concert and we tend to ignore it, or else manage the interruption, either with our ears or with our glares; if a baby has a crying fit or a phone rings and rings, we may have occasion to hear the movement again from the top. When I heard of the latter happening during a Mahler symphony lately, I was somewhat struck that incident-suppression prevailed, despite what I would consider Mahler's deep embrace of irreconcilables, inside and out—albeit in a decidedly more teleological, less...incidental way.

Λ

What am I doing, mind in the concert hall like that? Maybe it's better to state things more generally: something happens, which will have had, quite inadvertently, any number of complex, variable, and unforeseen interactions with everything else, down to the molecular level. This immanent vitality is quite incidental, belying the notion that one ever does more or less than simply take part in it. Music situates parts—gathering up bundles of messy connectivity, listening in; putting an ear to all that vast, tangled darkness, we draw close to the beating heart. The question of what we do in music is therefore revitalized by the exploration of incident.

Λ

Λ

Christian Wolff has consistently found some very effective and singular ways of taking the essential incidentality of music to heart. Above all, for me, is his use of the vertical wedge (Λ) in his scores, to denote some sort of indeterminate pause. One could never presume to govern incident—this would only reassert some version of the suppressive posture I described at the outset. Yet Wolff's *indication* of pauses with the wedge in my experience somehow succeeds in completely slackening their tension—immediate cut-away to some neutral register—in a way that traditionally notated caesurae never do. Perhaps this is because such a pause is neither counted, nor “felt” (as in a fermata), nor even required to happen at all, but merely *observed*. Whatever it is, we come across it, simply there.

Λ

Λ

And the wedge keeps cropping up, medium of the surrounding change suffusing all of the fitful, obsessive activity that playing Wolff often seems to entail—the shared ecology and atmosphere attending all those weird, squirrely shards of notated material, whether they conspire at any given moment to build-up coincidental coherence or drive it apart. For amid all the scrappy bits and pieces—somehow or other taken down, strung together and spun out by Wolff in endless parts—the wedges proliferate like so many teepees dotting the landscape: *there are others here*.

Λ

Other musicians, quite likely, since Wolff's music is profusely, chaotically social (though even in the solo music, one often feels oneself divided, split between multiple concurrent parts). And others still: other people, other parts, other worlds... How do we make peace with all of these? Like being startled by our own reflection in a mirror—glimpse of that strange, separate life passing silently within us—everything remains, yet remade from the middle.

Music is full of incident

When Mahler's artificial thunder subsides, leaving only the barest smattering of sounds to echo among distant instruments, the music seems to evaporate. Yet as it does, we are carried off into the depths of some vast forest, dimly lit by various small fires—whose are these?—while perhaps some wayward swans from Tuonela float past. Literally *everything* goes on in those spacious, opened moments (including us). And Wolff's music seems to spring forth from this grandeur, arising amid twigs and stones, feeling its way through the underbrush and going native as it spreads deeper into the uncharted interior. Sure, you might hear some chords, as likely as a phrase or three from an old worker song, some orphaned rhythmic figure looping along, or even lots of different things playing out at the same time in apparent cacophony—*wtf?!* Any number of these possibilities (and others) is typically at hand, with everything frequently turning on a dime, often due to some inadvertent circumstance of how the parts happen to coexist: real coincidence drives and shapes the experience. This stuff all came from somewhere, but it's here now and like so much nature unfolding, it could be *anything*. Harmony, in the most expansive sense, is free to be its big unwieldy self, creating opportunities that can only crop up, be seized, or pass in the moment, and Wolff constantly places you in the thick of it. The wedge is harmony, too; when it happens to line up in everyone's part it's a reminder that all is shared, and there's always more outside.

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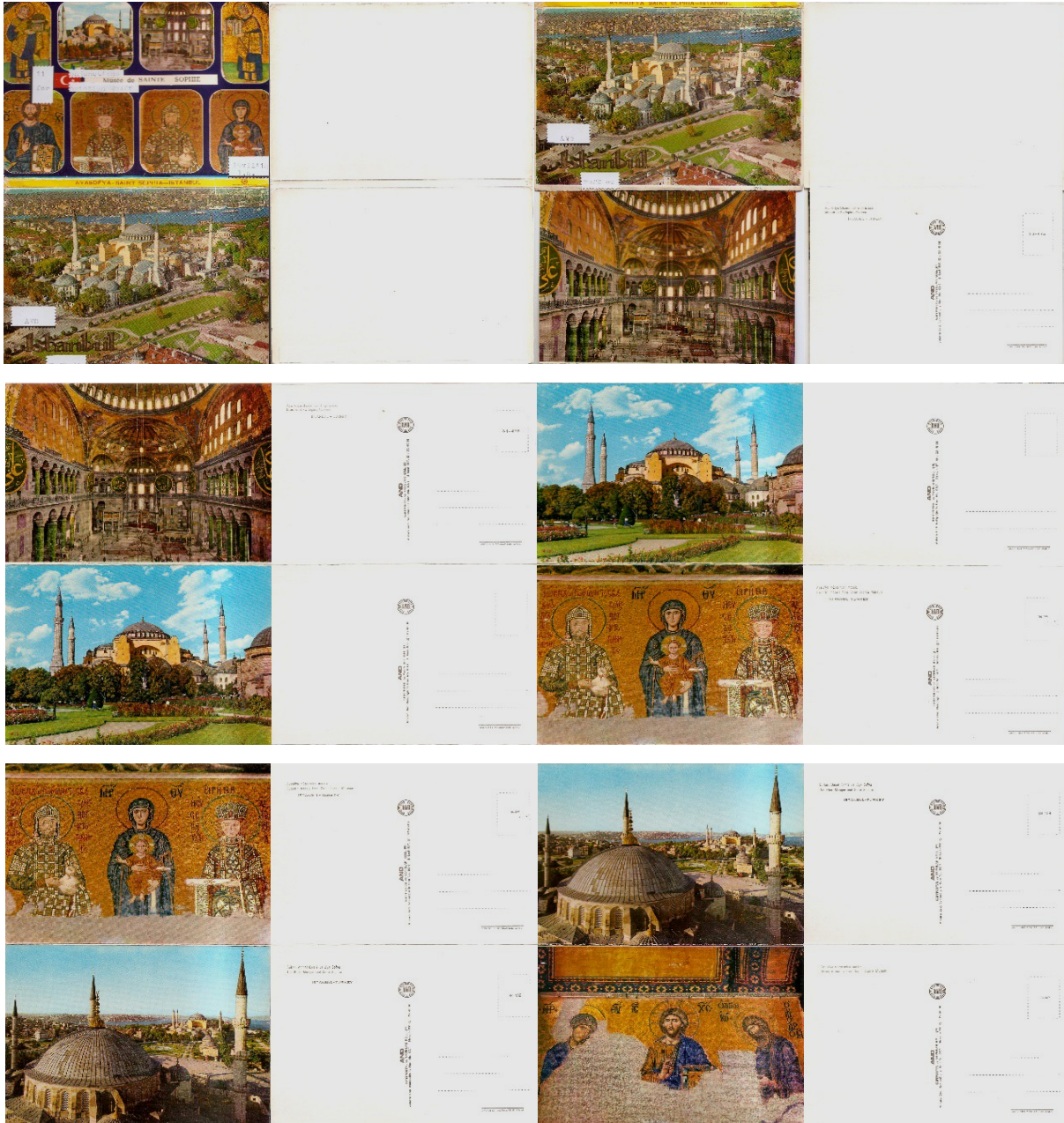
Wolff's wedges are like opening a window (regardless of what has been happening in the course of playing the music; regardless, too, of whatever is happening outside—perhaps, in both cases, most strikingly when *nothing* is going on). Literally, as in the way you have to stop everything else in order to do it. But I'm also fond of that old story, related by John Cage, where he was listening to Wolff play a piano piece near an open window, and the sounds outside were at least as strong as whatever he was playing. When he asked Wolff if he'd play the piece again with the window closed, Wolff said he'd be glad to, but that it wasn't necessary. The wedge also happens to resemble a loft window swung open from a top-mounted hinge. Indeed, this hinge-y quality is another component of the wedge: it doesn't simply break-open the situation, it binds it—the vertical wedge is also the sign for a mathematical conjunction.

^

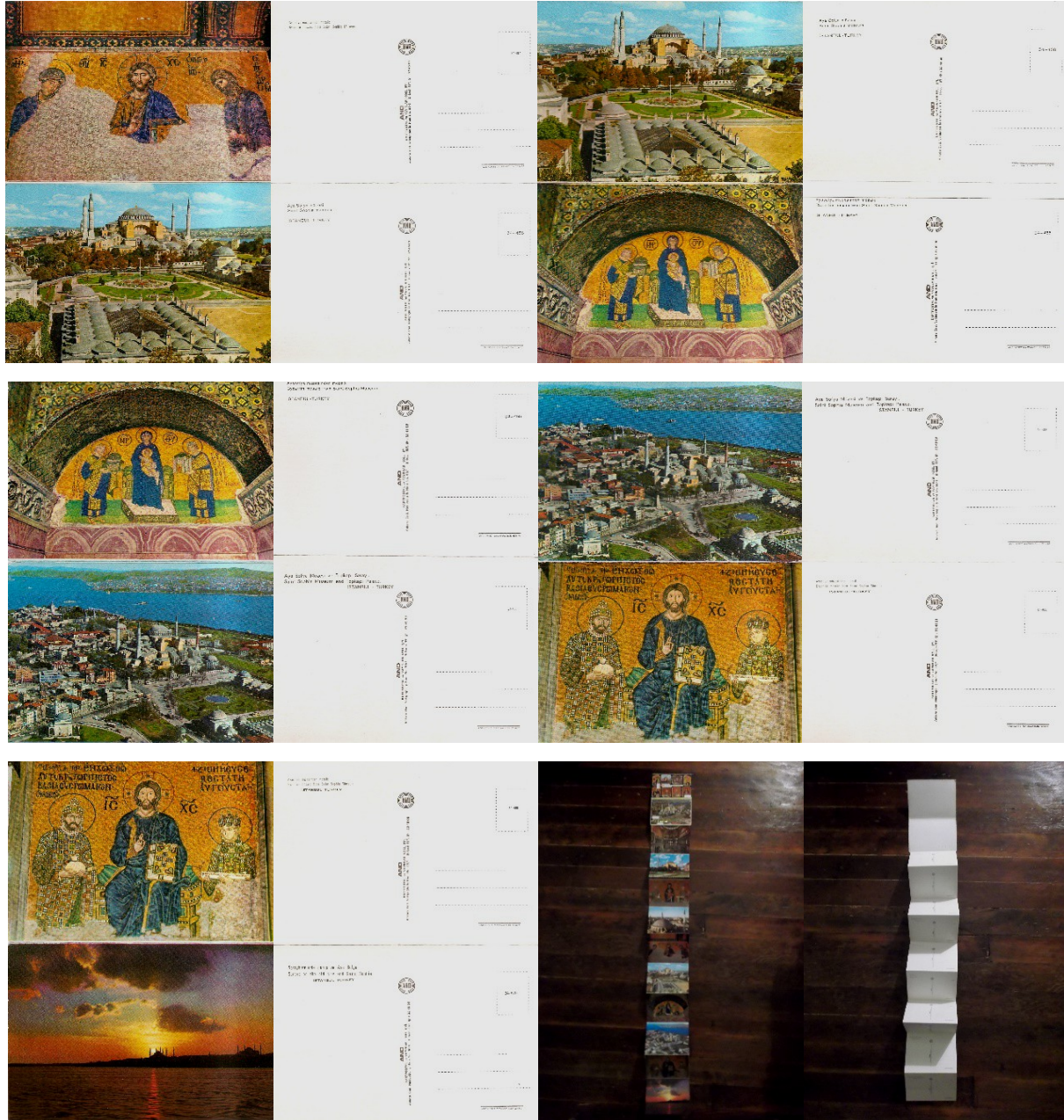
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AND Istanbul - 11 Conjunctions for Christian Wolff is a postcard folio from Hagia Sophia. It sat with me for some 6 years as I wondered what on earth I was ever going to do with it, until it finally dawned on me that nothing was to be done: it materializes and integrates the functions of the vertical wedge in uncanny and elegant ways, with its eleven accordion folds conjoining, along a series of wedges, one scene after another of the great basilica-turned-mosque-turned-museum, itself an historical conjunction of Christian and Muslim design. The subtle exquisite corpse comprised by the imagery—both in terms of abutting image pairings and the syncretic visual culture of Hagia Sophia itself—plays across the geometry of wedges and extends in dual fashion to the surrounding world, with the glossy image faces acting as almost-mirrors while the matte white reverse sides leave the usual space for correspondence, address, postage, carriage markings, etc. Finally, the folio seems to repeat a small, silent mantra to and of itself in the form of the publisher's acronym, imprinted on the back of each card: AND

Mark So



Music is full of incident





Crash and getting me started: how Robert Ashley changed my mind

Joshua Banks Mailman

My first encounter with Robert Ashley's music was when I was working in college radio in Chicago. We used to receive CDs from the label Lovely Music Ltd., among others. I suppose it was my first full-blown exposure to what we now call post-minimalist music, although these CDs did include earlier sound-art minimalism such as Alvin Lucier's. I'm not sure whether I got to hear William Duckworth's, Joan LaBarbara's, David Behrman's, Robert Ashley's, or "Blue" Gene Tyranny's music first, but despite some skepticism, I did find all of this music strangely attractive in ways I didn't expect.

Despite obvious stylistic differences between these musical artists, none of this music seemed to be trying to 'push the envelope', either in terms of how much could happen in any particular short span of time (how intricate it was), or in terms of what kind of new or unexpected sounds one might get a chance to hear. It was often overtly and unapologetically tonal and repetitive, but without the kind of hard-nosed abstract patterning I had grown to admire in the early works of Reich or Glass. Worse yet, some of it had voices talking about seemingly trivial matters over a bland wash of background electric keyboard playing. Huh?

Being an avid fan and sometimes evangelist for the music of Babbitt, Boulez, Schoenberg, Shapey, Carter, and Cage, and the like, I was not predisposed to this "Lovely" music. It had none of what I typically admire and a lot of what typically turned me off. And besides, what kind of wiseguy would name himself "Blue" Gene Tyranny?

I had thought that for me to enjoy it, so-called minimalist music (and art) had to also be semantically, associatively, affectively minimal, or miserly—you know, the Romantic "modernist," Platonic straw man of the "absolute" pure autonomous art-work—a hobby-horse that Ad Reinhardt (1963) rides in his "Art-as-art," thirty-nine-rules for timeless art, attempted as if purely through negation. (These were the implicit caveats that enabled my attraction to the early works of Reich and Glass I suspect. In the days before embodied mind (cognitive metaphor) theory and neo-process-philosophy started to hold sway, I was under the spell of Reinhardt's neo-platonic ethos.)

Yet as I scratched my head, something prompted me to keep scratching the surface of this music from Lovely, and yes it did start to rub off on me. I kept going back for more. Lovely's Mimi Johnson kept sending what I asked for, and, yes, we kept airing them (along with Babbitt, Cage, Xenakis, and all the rest) to all the Chicagoans who would listen.

So why did I like it at all? Well—I grew to admire aspects of all of these artists for different reasons which I won't explain here—why did I grow to like Ashley's works? All the operas of Ashley's that I know are basically just a half dozen or so people sitting each at a small table talking one at a time. These operas are pretty slim on action, and even slimmer on arias. In fact they utterly lack everything we typically go to the opera to experience: no Dance-of-the-Seven-Veils, no mournful *Pensiero* or Pilgrims' Chorus, no Ride of Valkyries, no spectacle, and certainly no operatic *sturm-und-drang*. Yet I always find Ashley's operas highly entertaining.

Ashley's operas excel at doing what operas are usually too overblown to do well: tell stories. Let's face it, as a genre, opera is more busy dramatizing stories, than just telling them. That's where Ashley comes in. He creatively answers the question of how the latter could be done within the opera genre. How? With taste, perfect pacing, and a peculiarly detached buoyant empathy, Ashley cleverly lets words do the talking.

I cannot, of course, in my own prose recreate the experience of enjoying an Ashley opera, but I can recount an example that is particularly memorable to me. It's the apocryphal "Story of Tomato Soup" (aka "Empire") from his *Atalanta (Acts of God)* from his *Perfect Lives* trilogy. It begins: "But this is the story of tomato soup and empire. Curiously, Northern Europeans conquered the tomato..." and continues circuitously through to the Great Depression, in which, when ordering tea at a diner, it was the teabag you had to pay for, not the hot water; you were not charged for hot water, but only for the teabag to dip into the hot water. We also then learn that you couldn't just walk into a diner and use their ketchup. Did they charge for ketchup? No. Ketchup was free if you ordered French fries, or a hamburger, or something else to go with the ketchup. Then after some intervening narration about this particular down-and-out Depression-era man trying to make his way through a tough time, we learn that he, with not a penny to his name, goes into a diner, sits at the counter and orders hot water for tea, but asks them to hold the tea: he'll have just the hot water. He then flavors the hot water by using some of their ketchup, which after all, you can have for free, as long as you order something to go with it, which he just did: the hot water. And so tomato soup—acquired for free—was born. So the story goes.

As the punch line was landing on my ears, I had the distinct impression of how a Sophoclean drama incrementally unravels a riddle built on solid logic—yet wry, sunny, optimistic, in an American vernacular vein—it was an Oedipus upside-down inside-out in an alternate universe. Such moments stick to my ribs. Perhaps (post-)minimalist music didn't have to be semantically, associatively, affectively minimal, or miserly, absolute, pure, autonomous. A story artfully told with the light touch of minimalist background music: couldn't that be another kind of opera? Couldn't that be another legitimate avenue of (post-) minimalist music?

In the early 2000s I read a book called *Changing Minds*, by Howard Gardner, which tries to explain the diversity of ways that various artists and public figures (Sigmund Freud, Nelson Mandela, Pablo Picasso, Martha Graham, Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein, Igor Stravinsky) changed many people's minds. After reading that book, I had a lot more appreciation for all the ways my own mind has been changed, and for the artists (and writers) whose work did that changing—I'll take some credit too for having a mind willing to be changed.

CRASH

Ashley's most recent and final opera *Crash* (2013) was premiered at the Whitney Biennial in 2014, apparently with all the performances selling out.¹ Fortunately it was performed again in April of this year at Roulette in Brooklyn. And I was able to attend the last of four performances.

Crash has three interlaced streams of text whose content is interrelated; each stream is delivered by a different "character" but the vocalist performing each character is rotated in each consecutive act. There are six acts and six vocalists. Each act pairs each character with a different vocalist. It's a sort of combinatorial gambit for maximizing variety—something right out of Babbitt's or Carter's playbook...but deployed in an utterly different game.

Character 1 speaks, or casually lectures, as if in an intimate "telephone" conversation about theories of (1) multi-year-long cycles of climaxes and nadirs in a person's life; as well as (2) physical stature of people; and (3) everyone's problems with neighbors. Before giving the floor to the next character, Character 1 always ends his/her speech casually affirming: "..., yeah" which creates an amusing semantically inflected repetitive cadence to the entire evening-long affair. Yeah.

¹ A 15-minute excerpt from the 2014 Whitney Biennial is viewable at: <http://vimeo.com/116173216>

Crash

Character 2 speaks in a kind of breathy pitch-inflected sing-song chant: a somewhat soothing almost haunting colloquial American *sprechgesang* that has no place anywhere but in Ashley's perfect concoction. Peculiar maladies are the subject of Character 2's text.

Character 3 speaks autobiographically, recounting formative events of the man-subject's life (although half the time is rendered by a female vocalist). Character 3 has an endearing vocal mannerism of pausing before and stretching out certain words, another feature that contributes a distinctly musical quality, which I quite enjoy.

For odd-numbered acts, the three vocalists seated each at his or her own small table to the left of stage center rendered the three characters. Meanwhile the vocalists seated at tables to the right of center stage accompanied with vaguely rhythmic drone chanting, a sort of muttered pitched chit-chat, the pitch material being unobtrusively triadic-pentatonic harmonization. There is no instrumental or electronic accompaniment. For the even-numbered acts, the right- and left-side vocalists switched, so that those on the right rendered the three characters, and those on the left rendered the backdrop of chordal muttering.

There is visual accompaniment: "Three simultaneous, but not synchronized photographs depicting vast, beautiful landscapes." Without being distracting or apparently relevant, these subliminally imbued the sense of well-being one gets from being in a wide open space. The projections served as faux windows onto the outside world. Thus in a sort of inversion of the usual relationship between visuals and music or text, these visuals of Ashley's *Crash* become an ambient background, dynamic scenic wallpaper, setting a mood without attracting attention, except perhaps like Rorschach-blots, as fodder for free-association.

All the vocalists delivered their lines with perfect timing and inflection. Yet Amirtha Kidambi's rendition of Character 3 in Act I especially got my attention. I can't forget the passage that goes like this: "We had a pony for a couple of years; we had a goat, and [pause] chickens. Chickens are hard to [pause] deal with, but we had rows of grapes and grapes give [pause] grape juice. When the grape juice goes **bad** in the making, you feed the [pause] grapemash to the chickens. Next morning the [pause] **chickens** were all **drunk**."

And this: "...only five people in the world understood Einstein's theory...[about a minute or two of intervening text seemingly about something else]...It was taking up a lot of my time just thinking about five people." In another act, when Gelsi Bell renders Character 2, we learn more about how people seem to suffer a "nadir every 28 years," then a few minutes later, we hear the recounting of an anecdote, happening, as it turns out, 14 years after one of the highpoints of his life. Things had taken a turn for the worse. After much intervening text we hear "I said to my friend that I was thinking of killing myself. My friend said: 'hey, friends don't do that to friends.' Yeah, except every 28 years. Yeah."

Though tragic it was also a comedic callback: a beginning cleverly repurposed as an ending. There are many such moments in *Crash*. Perhaps feeling myself in a musical setting, these textual mini-epiphanies stimulate my musical memory, reminding me of other experiences, such as when I first heard Lutoslawski's Third Symphony, when the Da-Da-Da-Da, which starts the symphony and its various processive subsections, serves ultimately to end the piece in a compelling flash of encapsulation that blindsided me when I first heard it.

... then ~30 minutes later ...

Beginning and ending of Lutoslawski's Third Symphony

A very familiar example is the end of the rondo of Haydn's "Joke" Quartet. The opening serves as the closing—as if cheekily only *it* knew from the get-go that it could do so.

Presto.

...then after 150 or so intervening measures...

9667

Crash

At the performance of *Crash*, there were so many of Ashley's lines I found myself desperately trying to catch and remember. Again because Ashley's work is ostensibly a musical work, I found myself being struck by certain resonances of experience with other music. The way his text would sometimes amusingly keep circling back around to the same word, with each occurrence accruing different shades of meaning because of its recurrence.

Somehow I find such passages of prose witty—especially after the text moves on to other material—the delightful impression is felt, as when I notice the curling around of a pitch or pitch-pair recurring in the second theme of Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* or the opening of Babbitt's *Around the Horn*:

"Year four was my first cup of [pause] coffee. My mother had to go work so she made me a cup of [pause] coffee. From that moment through the rest of my life I have drunk as much [pause] coffee as I can..." (excerpt from Ashley's *Crash*).



“Magic Thought”

Matt Marble

**have you been waiting now for a long time
when all the shadows hold a candle
just pull out the horse of course the horse you source in your mind
and learn the ropes that guide invisible reigns**

**i’ve got a little horsey in my mind and I can ride it all the time
i’ve got a little horsey in my mind and I can ride it all the time**

**so let’s paint tv robert ashley
i know you know we can get tired
talking with knots we know are old
old enough to know
how to unwind**

**if you say something, see something
hannah weiner you aided fire
just like the flame at the center of a magic thought**

magic magic magic magic thought

**folks will put up traps and walls
bills and laws to keep it quiet
only watching to take stock
bodega boys are hooting and hollering on my block
i could have sworn that they just fell into a magic thought**

magic magic magic magic thought

**i’ve got a little horsey in my mind and I can ride it all the time
i’ve got a little horsey in my mind and I can ride it all the time
i’ve got a little horsey in my mind and I can ride it all the time**

Remembering *Orange Dessert*: in Memoriam Robert Ashley

Paul A. Epstein

On February 9 and 10, 1967, The New Orleans Group (theater director Richard Schechner, painter/designer Franklin Adams, and I) put on two concerts of “Electronic Music, Theatre, and Intermedia” at Tulane University. We presented some of our own work and invited several other groups, including Robert Ashley and Gordon Mumma, who flew in from Ann Arbor. For the first concert, Ashley and Mumma performed a group of live electronic pieces including Mumma’s *Mesa: 5 Source Duo*, Ashley’s *Four Ways* and *Wolfman*, and a piece that involved a manually operated turntable (decades before the dj phenomenon.) The second concert concluded with Ashley’s *Orange Dessert*, a theater piece that for me was one of the highlights of the two evenings but that, aside from being included in the complete listing of Ashley’s work, seems to have been all but forgotten. Ashley’s website lists only a few performances between 1966 and 1968, and a web search yielded no additional information. Thus the following description is based almost entirely on my own recollections of a single performance.

On the stage there is a movie screen. In front of the screen, at the left and right corners, are two chairs. Two women enter and sit in the chairs, facing the audience. At the back of the hall a man with a microphone (Robert Ashley) conducts an audition, giving the women directions and correcting them. As Richard Schechner recalls it, “The directions are very simple body moves. ‘Walk across the stage. Sit. Cross your left leg over your right...’”^{*} The corrections are also simple. “Try it again but don’t hitch up your skirt.” He addresses them as if there were only one person, and since the women cannot see each other, they don’t know who is being corrected. Both have to respond. Ashley’s voice is as we came to know it, gentle, breathy, super-cool, yet with an edge of indifference that gradually becomes creepy. The response of the two women (who have been recruited from the staff of the Tulane Drama Review and prepared by Ashley in a brief meeting on the day of the performance) is diametrically opposite. One begins to bristle, becoming increasingly hostile. The other gradually shrivels under the quiet attack. Finally Ashley says, “I can’t do anything more with that.” There is a blackout, the women take their seats, and a color film begins. A man, in closeup, slowly peels an orange in one continuous strip. He slices the orange, places it in a dish, adds brandy, and ignites it. The film and the piece end.

The effect of *Orange Dessert* was unexpectedly powerful, given the pedestrian nature of its text and actions. Strangely, while my memory of the piece seems fairly complete to me, it does not include sound other than that of Ashley’s voice. Yet Ashley listed *Orange Dessert* as “electronic music theater.” Perhaps the impact of the theatrical dimension of the work overshadowed whatever electronic music may have been present. In any case, I believe the power of *Orange Dessert* stemmed from its political content. It was a feminist statement remarkable for the astuteness and subtlety of its theatricalization. And unlike much political art of that period, I suspect it could be performed today with no loss of power.

^{*}*Environmental Theater*, New York, 1973, p. 92

THE BEST AMERICAN POETRY YOU'LL NEVER READ

Larry Polansky

“the poets who do not write. ...
they make poetry out of handfuls of air” (John Lee Clark)

A few months ago, my friend Kenny Lerner sent me a link to a new poem on YouTube, called “Made in the USA,” by himself and collaborator Peter Cook. Together, as *Flying Words Project*, they perform often, all over the world. They live in different cities, so their habit is to create new poems in hotel rooms while on the road. “Made in the USA” is a poem about epidemics, sneezing, DNA, social ills, the great connectivity of the universe, and other issues. Full of inventive imagery, each line propulsively spawns the next. Typical of Flying Words Project poems, it starts personal, gets political, and ends up back where it started.

One particularly effective and unusual moment in the poem depicts a ray of sunlight piercing a bead of sweat. If it were a conventional poem, I could quote that part here, and you could decide for yourself if it was “effective and unusual.” I can’t do that. Lerner and Cook work in American Sign Language (ASL). The image I refer to involves Cook using the same handshape simultaneously in both hands — in this case the bent index finger — to represent a ray of sunlight piercing a dripping bead of sweat. Both hands use the same motion, perpendicular to each other. Two ideas, one piercing the other. One image.

I considered how I might translate this into English. The beauty of Cook’s phrase — image — is its homonymic economy, a handshape rhyme. He sets it up well before it occurs. This is not something that would likely occur in everyday sign, but it’s grammatically natural. One might translate it simply as “sunlight pierces a falling bead,” or more ornately as “sweat and sun in tired reunion.” I’m pretty sure these aren’t very good — I’m a composer, not a poet — and I bet someone with more experience in poetic translation could do better. I don’t know how to translate this poem’s poetry, but I can try to explain why it is poetry.

Cook and Lerner are major poets, two of a number of active contemporary American poets whose work is created and performed in American Sign Language. Some of the best known other poets are Patrick Graybill, Monique Holt, Debbie Rennie, Rosa Lee Gallimore, Ayisha Knight-Shaw, Nathie Marbury, Ella Mae Lentz, and the late Dorothy Miles, Gil Eastman, and Clayton Valli. All are Deaf, first-language signers, and their work is essential to the Deaf community. But it is unlikely that you’ve ever heard of any of them.

My interest in ASL, and its poetry, is a little unusual. As a composer I’m interested in how we “understand” music, which is not a language. It’s sound, with its own rules, history, styles, and expectations. Music has no intrinsic, practical meaning — you can’t sit down at the piano and play “My aunt bought an ugly new green hat with a bird on top.” ASL itself is oddly similar to contemporary music

in that its “language” is not widely understood. ASL can be as beautiful to watch as music is to hear, but the former is a natural language, replete with meaning. Music is sound without meaning, ASL is meaning without sound.

ASL has a relatively small number of speakers — depending on how one counts, somewhere between 1–3 million. The audience for ASL poetry is even smaller. Poetry challenges our understanding of language, and is not intended as practical communication. Just as most Deaf people have far more pressing concerns than the poetry of Clayton Valli, Patrick Graybill and Rosa Lee Gallimore, most English speaking Americans don’t pay all that much attention to John Ashbery, Louise Glück, or W.S. Merwin. Since ASL poetry has generally not been translated effectively into English, its audience is limited to a small subset of the Deaf community. But this art form has, by now, a long tradition, and a sizeable enough corpus is available to merit our serious engagement with it. Even though it is poetry in a language other than English, it is American poetry, and part of our culture.

What follows is an introduction to ASL poetry by a musician, intended for hearing, non-ASL speakers. I’ll discuss a few classic poems in order to make them more available to non-Deaf English speakers. I’ll explain some of the most common techniques, and try to show how the poems emanate from ASL. Understanding how poetry functions in a signed language may change the ways we think about poetry in any language.

From hand to page

Poetry in ASL is an evolving art form, and its practitioners vary in their relationships to the dominant or contact language — English. Dorothy Miles, one of the earliest video-recorded modern ASL poets, wrote (and published) her poetry both in English and ASL. Other ASL poets, like Cook and Rosa Lee Gallimore, use English creatively in tandem with ASL. In Flying Words Project, Kenny Lerner provides spoken glosses, or what he dryly calls “captions” to the signing, and often joins in the physical performance. Because of the use of English, their work is accessible to both the hearing and Deaf communities. Lerner’s glosses are not translation, there are beautiful and important differences in content between the English and the ASL. The younger Gallimore often explores the idea of translation explicitly, weaving slang and different sign dialects (Signed English, for example, which is not ASL) into the fabric of the work.

What might be called “classic” ASL poetry — including that of Valli, Eastman, Lentz, Rennie and Graybill — is completely and originally in sign. The majority of this work is widely available on video and the Internet, but for the most part it has not been rendered into English. John Lee Clark, in his essential anthology *Deaf American Poetry* suggests that, perhaps partially because of “a mistrust of the English language that many Deaf people share... Like many of his contemporaries who pioneered the art form, Valli thought for many years that his work could not be translated into English.”

ASL poetry is often interpreted in performance, sometimes as part of the work itself, more often for pedagogical purposes in teaching the language to non-signers. In the early poetry performance groups in Rochester, NY, in the 1980s (which included both Deaf and non-Deaf people like Peter Cook, Kenny Lerner, Debbie Rennie, Jim Cohn, and Wendy Low), the interpreters were artistically equal members of the ensemble. However, there are still relatively few standard poetic translations of ASL poems, nor has there been much discussion of how this might be achieved. Clark further notes, “Another factor is the relative lack of literary interaction between ASL poets and fluent signers who have an intimate knowledge of poetry in both languages.”

Not surprisingly, there is a great deal of standard English material translated (on video) into ASL.

Patrick Graybill has been a pioneer of this enterprise on behalf of the Deaf community. His ASL versions of standard American texts (like the “Pledge of Allegiance,” “The Lord’s Prayer,” political texts, and so on) are eloquent and extraordinarily literate. They are also “very ASL,” which is to say rich in ASL grammar and creative in its linguistic principles. These ASL texts are as important for teaching ASL to young Deaf children as for their content. A less pedagogical but equally important contemporary example of English-ASL translation is Monique Holt’s project to translate the complete Shakespeare sonnets. For an example of this remarkable enterprise, see her videoed performance of the 30th sonnet, at Dartmouth’s Hood Museum of Art. But these are just examples, and even though there is a tremendous amount of interpreting going on, there are relatively few “texts” in ASL. Since the (small) Deaf community needs English material more than the (large) hearing community needs ASL, there is a radically unequal flow of translation between the two languages.

Rennie: “The Swan”

Poems in sign can do things that spoken/written language poems can’t. A clear example, and one that you don’t need to know any ASL to appreciate, is Debbie Rennie’s “The Swan,” a short naturalistic poem from the early 1980s. It begins with the image of a tree and its reflection in water, both waving but in different rhythms. The poet observes both. Rennie has two hands, a body and a face to work with — she can present multiple images and perspectives simultaneously. Unlike written poetry, sign poetry can pack a lot of meaning into a single moment. The more it does so, in fact, the less sign resembles written languages.

Rennie’s poetry is often imagistic in the literal sense. She focused on representative, iconic images. Signs are not words, just as languages are not their vocabularies. Sign languages are generally more economical than spoken languages. That is, they have smaller “dictionaries,” with fewer discrete, one-to-one linguistic elements (“words”). Signs get a lot of cognitive mileage out of the combination of hand and body movement, inflection, facial indicators, context, perspectival shifts and spatialization. A simple sign like “to need” (a bent, or “x” index finger) can be inflected by movement, facial indicators, and context to mean anything from “I could use a...” to “ABSOLUTELY MUST” (not to mention as “a bead of sweat” and a “ray of light”).

“The Swan” only uses about four actual signs (like “tree” and “bird”). It is mostly made up of subtle mimetic and perspectival shifts, both of which are fundamental to sign grammar. Sometimes Rennie is the swan, sometimes she’s looking at it, sometimes a little of both. Her perspectives morph smoothly and continuously — at one point the water ascends, becoming the swan’s wings — in accordance with ASL linguistic principles. Any signer would understand what she does, and be moved by the playfulness of how she does it. “The Swan” is minimal and beautiful, haiku-like in its constraints. Like any good poetry, it is disciplined and economic in its exploration of linguistic possibilities.

But “The Swan” is difficult to translate onto the printed page so as to preserve Rennie’s performance, her “reading”. It is said that poetry is that which cannot be translated, like a joke or a pun. The accomplished translator Gregory Rabassa says that: “The fact that there’s no such thing as a perfect translation is part of the definition of translation.” Translators of written poetry find ways to deal with this, often not so much translating as writing a new, parallel poem. Reading Rimbaud in English is not ideal, but it is better than not reading Rimbaud at all.

The translation scholar Willis Barnstone says that “Moving between tongues, translation acquires difference. Because the words and grammar of each language differ from every other language, the transference of a poem from one language to another involves differing sounds and prosody.” But

translating from tongue to hand, from sound to gesture, is a lot harder.

Written languages share some basic principles — spelling, nouns, adjectives, verbs, and some paradigmatic sentence order. The latter, for example, varies widely — a fundamental distinction can be made between linguistic structures that are subject first (“You must use the force, Luke”) and those that are object first (“The force you must use, Luke”). In translating from one language to another, one has to adjust for that.

ASL, and sign languages in general, are tail first (sometimes referred to as object/ subject/verb or topic/comment). In and of itself, this makes ASL no harder to translate to English than Japanese, or even Yiddish. But what might be called modal differences present a more interesting challenge. Sign languages are composed of gestures in space, often several at once, not unitary, sequential sounds in time. Mimesis, movement, and perspective can all combine simultaneously to create a single complex meaning. Students of writing are admonished to “show it, don’t say it.” Similarly, sign language interpreting students are taught to “show it, don’t say it,” a directive essential to both in poetic and conversational signing. Modal differences engender different kinds of translation losses. “As I move away, the fat, old, smelly, far-off cat climbs a tree blowing in the wind” can be a single, eloquent ASL gesture.

Yet English is commonly interpreted into sign, for every conceivable purpose. Interpretation is used for everything from doctor’s appointments and classrooms, to theater performances, lectures, book clubs, and social events. It may be fair to say though, that interpreters are probably more important for the non-Deaf community — who are, in general, terrible at communicating with Deaf people — as they are for the Deaf community, who are experts at communicating with a world that doesn’t understand their culture very well, their language at all.

Ironically, the performative interpretation of songs at concerts is often the way that the hearing world encounters ASL (not to mention Mayor Bloomberg’s interpreter). One way that ASL interpreting students are taught to evaluate their work is by whether or not the transaction (meaning the exchange of meaningful communication) is successful. It is relatively clear whether or not a patient and doctor, or a student and teacher understand each other. Poetry has no similar metric for success; it pushes a language to, and past its limits. It’s not necessarily interpretable, because like even the simplest joke — “Take my wife, please” — poetry uses language against itself.

There’s no written language where one can actually, physically, become a swan, and, as in the end of Rennie’s poem, settle into the water with a slight jiggle. But with its concentrated reliance on imagery and avoidance of “words,” perhaps “The Swan” doesn’t need translation. Signers and non-signers understand it in fundamentally different ways, but it is comprehensible to both. Perhaps a hearing person, after learning a little bit about how the poem works, would be able to appreciate it in a new way, a Deaf way.

Rennie, along with Cook and Lerner, was part of a generation of ASL poets who emerged in the Rochester, NY, Deaf poetry movement in the early 1980s. All were associated with the National Technological Institute for the Deaf (NTID), which is part of the Rochester Institute of Technology. NTID is one of two universities or colleges in the U.S. (and maybe the world) where sign is the primary language. Rennie, Cook, Lerner, and others were taught or influenced by the previous generation of Deaf poets and performers who taught at NTID, including Patrick Graybill (who works in ASL) and Robert Panera (who writes in English). In *The Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox*, a documentary by Miriam Lerner (an accomplished interpreter and scholar who works at NTID, and Kenny’s wife), is

a unique and detailed history of this movement. It contains extraordinary early footage, not only of the early work of Rennie, Cook, Lerner and others, but of historical events like the legendary meeting between Allen Ginsberg and Patrick Graybill. As far as I know, this film also contains the only available record of Eric Malzkuhn performing his famous and influential version of “Jabberwocky.” Kenny Lerner (hearing, bi-lingual), like Graybill and the poet and scholar Karen Christie (who is Deaf, but bilingual and writes her poetry in English) still teach at NTID. They all teach in ASL.

These younger poets, by and large, started from scratch. A central figure in the Rochester Deaf poetry movement was the hearing, English language poet named Jim Cohn, founder of the Bird’s Brain Society in 1984 (a name proposed by Peter Cook, after Ginsberg’s poem “Birdbrain!”). Supported in part by both Graybill and Panera, this was a “non-academic ‘underground’ poetry project ... to encourage hearing-impaired students ... to identify themselves and interact in ways that would raise poetic consciousness and awareness that sign language is a viable medium of art. We began with a series of sign language poetry performances by deaf poets once a month in a well frequented campus bar” (Cohn, 1986). In Cohn’s essential memoir *Sign Mind*, commenting on the paucity of early-recorded examples of ASL poetry, storytelling, and wordplay — the Deaf cultural heritage — he says “until around 1984, ASL poetry had been like a teardrop in some forgotten video.”

“Memories”

Patrick Graybill, still an active poet, is an elder statesmen of Deaf literature. Unlike Rennie and Cook, his poems, mostly created in the 1980s, often deal directly with the Deaf experience, emphasizing the centrality of ASL to both culture and identity. Karen Christie and Dorothy Wilkins, in their foundational essay on ASL poetry, call this “resistance” or “liberation” literature. Perhaps the greatest and most clearly identifiable example of this is Gil Eastman’s masterpiece, “Epic,” an astonishing 20-minute poem which narrates the Deaf President Now movement at Gallaudet, a central event in Deaf history.

The eminent Deaf Culture scholars Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, in *Inside Deaf Culture* describe the “anxiety of culture” that exists in the work of Deaf artists, pointing out that later generations, like Cook and Lerner, felt that they could be “free of meaning” and deal with levels of higher abstraction and universality. This might be called, after Christie and Wilkins, “post-resistance” ASL poetry. The Deaf English language poet Raymond Luczak even goes so far as to say: “My answer to the question of deaf art is this: Don’t even answer it. Don’t even try.”

However, Graybill, Valli, Lentz and others, in most of their work, deal directly and consistently with Deaf culture, language, and oppression. Their meaning is clear, even if it is often conveyed allegorically or metaphorically. Often autobiographical, these poets, especially Graybill, describe the linguistic isolation of growing up and existing in a hearing world. Their work is the work of a community, the American Deaf community, establishing a new art form, albeit one that has deep roots in Deaf theater (for example, Graybill was an important performer in the National Theater of the Deaf). Sometimes, though, these poets’ work eschews descriptions of hardship in order to exult in what Rennie calls the “blessing” of being Deaf — they describe alternate approaches to seeing and understanding. Ella Lentz’s work beautifully exemplifies this attitude, in poems like “Eye Music” and “To a Hearing Mother,” and others. H-Dirksen Bauman, whose Ph.D. thesis on ASL poetry is indispensable, points out (in a short history of modern ASL poetry in his introduction to *Signing the Body Poetic*) that the distinction between the young Rochester poets (Cook, Lerner, and Rennie) and Valli, Lentz, and Graybill is as much technical as topical: “For some critics, the work of Flying Words Project is more akin to the avant-garde literary tradition of Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, and Allen Ginsberg, while Valli and Lentz represent a more formalist approach akin to Robert Frost’s.”

Graybill grew up, like many Deaf people, in a linguistically repressive, even hostile, educational system. Like many Deaf people, he found a clear identity in his own language and culture. He also found artistic freedom. This narrative is central to much of Deaf poetry, visual art (like the visual art movement known as De'Via — “Deaf View/Image Art”), and theater (the National Theater of the Deaf’s landmark 1972 televised production called “My Third Eye” had an enormous impact on Deaf artists of all disciplines). Some of Graybill’s poems are well known in the Deaf community, like “Liberation,” a utopian and humble plea for the equality of ASL and English.

Graybill’s autobiography: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROpzH7BwfKE>

Graybill’s work is characterized as well by a deliberate, explicit attention to poetic technique. This is more than poetic formalism. A teacher by spirit (and an influential one by practice), he skillfully explores and illustrates techniques in part for their pedagogical possibilities to younger artists, and for Deaf people in general. “Liberation” is a good example. Graybill confines himself to one handshape, the “B” or flat-palm, a handshape often referred to as neutral or unmarked because it is easy and natural to form. By contrast, Graybill’s student Peter Cook seems to often favor marked handshapes, those that are more difficult to produce. A clear example is the “x” (bent index finger) handshape (“bead of sweat/ray of light”) in “Made in the USA.” Another Cook poem, “Need,” explodes from the morphogenesis of this same handshape. In a little over two minutes, the meaning of the crooked finger moves from: the title verb to an oil derrick to oil lines to a gas pump to a man chopping down a tree (to make the paper for the memo to send a man to war) to the bullet that hits the soldier to the drippings from the soldier’s coffin, and, finally, back to “need.”

Regardless of handshape, both Cook and Graybill usually follow a deep-seated (though fluid) grammatical principal of sign: generally, in a moving sign of two hands, only one handshape is used. “...if both hands are moving in a sign, then the handshapes, locations and movements of the two hands must be the same...If the two hands in a sign have different handshapes, then one must be stationary.” (Lane, et al) In both “Liberation” and “Made in the USA,” a single handshape is used for dual gestural pronouns with differing and changing referents: in “Made ...” the bead of sweat/ray of sunlight; in “Liberation,” English/ASL. In other poems, though, such as “Reflection,” Graybill intentionally violates the “same handshape” principle, exploring the idea of saying two completely different things at once, one in each hand, with different signs and/or handshapes. Bauman and others cite this as one of many cinematic influences in ASL poetry and storytelling, in which performers adapt filmic techniques. The contemporary storyteller Manny Hernandez makes virtuosic use of this in his work. Being able to say two things at once is one of many things that distinguishes ASL from written poetry.

But “Liberation” uses the “B” hand almost exclusively; the poem is based on restricting handshapes. This is a challenging poetic and narrative discipline, analogous, perhaps, to something like a sestina. This technique and many others have long traditions in ASL storytelling and folk poetry. Rutherford’s *A Study of Deaf American Folklore* is a good introduction to some of these forms, as is Ben Bahan’s essay in *Signing the Body Poetic*. Bahan himself is one of the great modern masters of storytelling. There are also numerous virtuosic examples of number and handshape stories recorded by Cokely and Shenk on the standard ASL instruction texts called the “green books.”

The composer Lou Harrison counseled artists to “cherish, conserve, consider and create.” Similarly minded, the early ASL poets drew deeply on traditional storytelling techniques in their work, transforming them into new poetic forms. Cook and Graybill’s use of handshape economy to structure poems is both traditional and radical, as in Graybill’s use of the same shape in two hands to mean

something different. At one powerful moment in “Liberation,” Graybill “softens” the B-handshape sign for “English” into the sign for, well, “signing.” Graybill’s set of “haikus” called “Memories,” a set of four poems about his childhood at the Kansas School for the Deaf (KSD), exemplifies both the clarity and linguistic/autobiographical foci of his work. Residential schools like KSD have, historically, been the spiritual heart of Deaf culture, and are often where competence and virtuosity develop. These are true haikus, but as Graybill points out, the 5|7|5 = 17 structure is measured in sign rhythm, not syllabification. Each poem ends in a different “frozen image,” expressing a different emotional conclusion for each. In the first, Graybill shows his happiness on returning to school; in the second (“ychh”), how physically ugly the school was; in the third, his horror at not being allowed to sign; and in the fourth, he caricatures a teacher’s bulldog countenance.

The third haiku is a powerful comment on the love and loss of language. It might be “glossed” (with additional commentary in brackets) as:

SPEECH CLASS AGAIN!

[distasteful, learning to speak English was usually a school priority]

I CAN SIGN ASL TO MY FRIENDS

[using the sign that means to sign fluently, naturally, turning to one side]

OR SIGN IN A SIMPLER WAY TO OTHERS

[maybe to non-native signers, using the sign that might mean “to make signs,” turning to the other side]

NOT ALLOWED! WHAT’S THIS MITTEN?

[shows hands put in mittens, tied together; hands were often restrained to keep kids from signing]

[looks up in sadness and frustration, hands bound in front]

Christie and Wilkins describe this poem in great detail, primarily from the perspective of Deaf culture. They provide a different, more detailed gloss than the one above (focusing on Graybill’s language), and offer an English translation (“What? It’s time for speech class again?!/ But look I can sign smoothly with all my classmates/What?! You are punishing me!...”). They structure the poem in three lines, like a haiku (the second comprised of the second and third of my gloss) and note Graybill’s use of directional symmetry. The poem opens and closes with the narrator, horrified at the prospect of speech class and being punished for signing, in an “upward gaze” at the “teacher” —a metaphor, perhaps, for the Deaf community, subject to the authority of the hearing world. That authority is often expressed in the form of a hostile linguistic phobia — deafness can’t be abolished, but language can.

Christie and Wilkins also discuss the irony of the mittens —both brutal and soft. Dennis Cokely has pointed out (in conversation) those mittens’ cruel efficiency. They take away the three fundamentals of signing —location, handshape, and motion. A fluent signer can, in fact, communicate using any one of these. Graybill carefully shows how all were cruelly, efficiently gagged.

Now in his 70s, Graybill has recently re-emerged as a poet, giving a brilliant recent performance at the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College. After a long hiatus from making poems — he told me he rarely has the opportunity anymore — he performed some of his older work (in markedly different rhythms) and unveiled some new work with considerable alacrity.

“Dandelions”

Clayton Valli (1951–2003) is perhaps the most famous and widely imitated ASL poet. Valli taught linguistics at Gallaudet University, and was at the center of the large and active Deaf community in Washington, D.C. Peters calls him the “Deaf Robert Frost,” perhaps because of his use of naturalist metaphors to express his relationship to Deaf language and culture. Like Frost, Valli uses language simply, creatively, and evocatively, the ASL counterparts of lines like “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”

“Dandelions” is one of Valli’s most well-known poems. It is frequently “re-performed”—a project by students in ASL classes. Valli’s own performance is on Poetry in Motion, but there are many versions of it by others easily available on the internet. Like a Frost poem, “Dandelions” is accessible on a number of levels, as deep as one needs it to be. I often use it as the first introduction to ASL poetry. What follows is not a translation, but a gloss of the poem, one I made for a Dartmouth class on ASL poetry. I’ve marked a few timings, so that non-ASL speakers can watch and follow along. “Dandelions” has, in fact, been translated a number of times (more on this below). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1XzFWYWv7fM>

“Dandelions”

YELLOWFLOWER
MANY IN THE GRASS
WAVING IN THE WIND
MAN COMES, LOOKS, ANGRY, SEES
YELLS: “D-A-N-D-E-L-I-O-N-S” (:13 SEC)
PULLS THEM OUT
MOWS
ALL GREEN
RAIN FALLS, SUN SHINES
GROUND IS WARMED/LIFE BEGINS
SOMETHING STARTS TO APPEAR
LOOKS AROUND
BLOOMS
YELLOW FLOWER (:33)
BEES COMES, POLLINATE
FLOWERS WAVING IN THE WIND
EVERY NIGHT CLOSE UP, OPEN UP AGAIN THE NEXT MORNING
FINALLY THEY BECOME A WHITE PUFFBALL, OPEN UP
WAVING IN THE WIND (MORE THAN DANDELIONS)
MAN COMES, YELLS “T-H-E-R-E”
PULLS ONE OUT
SPREADS

The poem is an explicit and obvious metaphor for the relationship of Deaf culture and ASL to the hearing world. At least I’d always thought it was obvious. When I showed it on the first day of class at Dartmouth (to a group of hearing students with no ASL proficiency), most of the students didn’t catch the Deaf metaphor. They got that it was a metaphor but thought it has a larger meaning, perhaps for all ideas that were repressed in such a way that the seeds of their liberation were spread. One student thought it was about “man’s attempted subjugation of the natural world.” I explained that Valli’s poems usually refer to Deaf culture, but the more I thought about it, the more I appreci-

ated their insight. Valli's art, like other great protest poets and singers (like say, Victor Jara or Bob Dylan), combines beauty and specificity to express universality. By artistically and eloquently arguing for Deaf culture, Valli's work becomes about a lot more than that.

Glosses have the emotional bandwidth of a telegram. Intentionally crude, they provide a way to represent ASL without even the appearance of translation. But what they can't convey are what makes the poem a poem. Valli changes perspectives with extraordinary fluidity — he "becomes" the dandelion, the bees, even the puffballs (swaying in the wind). He makes a deliberate use of spatial symmetry and physical rhythm to delineate sections, the formal design of the poem. Facial indicators are used to provide subtle counterpoint to the more explicit semantic contents of his hands. Valli creates new "signs," smoothly transferring energy in the movement of one handshape into another (two examples: the very first sign, where "yellow" morphs smoothly into "flower," forming a new contractive sign; and the way that the flowers open/close each day/night). These latter are forms of what Lane et al refer to as blending signs.

Something that is more difficult to explain is Valli's sophisticated experimentation with what are called, in ASL, classifiers. He often invents new classifiers in his poems, and, as in Rennie's mimesis, he both obeys and expands linguistic rules. Classifiers are something like descriptive, moveable, general pronouns. They occur in very limited form in some spoken languages, but are important, diverse, and common in ASL. There are many classifiers, referring to different meanings (person, vehicle, animal ...), shapes (box, slab, tube, spherical, circular, linear, ...), and size. They are malleable: one can represent, describe and move around an old, fat person walking up a hill with one finger. Classifiers are deeply embedded in the cognition of first-language signers, less so in those who learn signing later on. They are fascinating, powerful, and to someone who has to learn them, a bit mysterious.

As in Rennie's poem, Valli's whole body is involved, invoking the wind, the swaying of the puffballs and dandelions, and the shifts of perspective from "the man" to, presumably, the young boy to whom he speaks.

Like "The Swan," "Dandelions" contains relatively few signs that have direct relationships to "words." Valli doesn't need these kinds of one-to-one signs very often, nor do most other ASL poets. Arguably, conversational sign doesn't need them very much either. The fewer of these kinds of signs that occur the more a sign language is distinguished from a spoken one — the difference, say, between Signed English (manually representing English grammar and words) and ASL. "Dandelions" consists mostly of moving classifiers, often invented or transformed to suit the poem. As Lane et al point out, "Because speakers know the grammatical rules of their language, those rules can be violated to artistic effect." Invented classifiers, like Cook's "ray/bead," distinguish poetic from everyday signing, in the same way that Gertrude Stein's prose is not "everyday" English.

Valli's classifiers — fist, open hand, extended finger — are examples of his preference for smooth, unmarked handshapes, imbuing his poems with a gentle demeanor that, were it written, might be called sonorous or mellifluous. Lane et al point out that, among other things "the form of ASL poetry is dictated by the assonance and dissonance of handshapes." If this is true, then formally, Valli's work (assonance) stands in stark relationship to Cook's (dissonance). Valli's use of handshapes is disciplined, a manual economy that shifts the focus to other things: movement, use of space, facial expressions, timing, and gestural virtuosity. It's like speaking mostly in pronouns, using pitch, loudness, and facial expression to convey meaning. His poem shows how a fluent signer could communicate effectively with mittens on, as long as he or she can move freely.

Another technique in this poem is fascinating. Valli uses fingerspelling to acknowledge the precariousness of ASL's strange bilinguality (what Rutherford calls diglossic bilingualism). ASL is typical of sign languages in its frequent borrowing from spoken language, and the most obvious example is fingerspelling, usually used for proper names, technical, scientific and unfamiliar terms, and other words that, because of the small size of the community or the context of the conversation, may not have or need their own signs. Extremely common fingerspellings often become signs of their own, in a kind of shorthand, if a subgroup of signers ends up using them frequently (this can happen quite locally, and temporarily). Some common fingerspellings become what are called lexicalized fingerspellings. They used to be called loan signs but that term is now reserved for borrowings from other sign languages, such as country names. Lexicalized signs are generally denoted in upper-case, preceded by hash-marks, and some of the most common examples are #BACK, #JOB, #CAR, #APT ("apartment") These spellings acquire special hand movements, elisions, and locational conjugations, and become highly expressive and robust signs of their own. #BACK, for instance, can be moved around, and with two hands, to mean back to any particular place, or even "back together" (as in "they broke up, but now they're back together"). The fluidity and integration of this kind of borrowing adds greatly to ASL's richness and suppleness.

Fingerspelling has, throughout history, played an important role in traditional ASL storytelling and folk poetry, as in "handshape" and "number" stories — signed abecedarians which are often performed at high levels of virtuosity. Some handshape stories, called ABC stories, use a different, alphabetically ordered handshape for each line. Some number stories "count" up to 100 and then back down again, each number handshape used in sequence (the video examples for the "green books" contains some dazzling examples). Peters discusses Rennie's famous modern example of this technique: "Veal Boycott," in which the word "C-A-L-F" is spelled several times, each letter showing some aspect of the making of veal. "Veal Boycott" is an example of what Rutherford calls iconic representation in fingerspelling — the letter shapes and movements have mimetic and semantic meanings of their own. Another of Valli's poems, "Something Not Right" spells out the phrase "DEAF EDUCATION FAILS" in a palimpsest of initialized signs (those in which the handshape refers to an English word). Some of these signs are awkward and non-idiomatic, ironically referring, perhaps, to English's clumsy influence on ASL, and the use of handshape stories themselves in education.

Valli's use of fingerspelling in "Dandelions" is not arbitrary. For Deaf people it is an unambiguous cultural reference. He spells two words in the poem: "D-A-N-D-E-L-I-O-N-S" and "T-H-E-R-E." The first word is shouted by a man immediately after Valli invents the beautiful new compound sign YELLOWFLOWER— two languages, the same thing. The act of spelling clearly signifies that the "man" is "The Man" — hearing, in charge, and derisive of ASL and Deaf culture. The second spelling — "T-H-E-R-E" — is even more connotative. There is no reason to spell that word — in ASL you just point. But that's Valli's point: spelling the word is awkward, stilted, and in this context, authoritarian.

Valli also mouths each word, in what could be a reference to contact signing, how Deaf signers communicate with hearing people who aren't native, or fluent in ASL. This involves slower signing, changing word order to be more like English, and often mouthing words. Oddly, this is another example of ASL's ability to do "two things at once," like the way that Graybill sets different handshapes and meanings for each hand, which is something unique to signing. "When a signer produces an ASL sign and simultaneously speaks, whispers or mouths its English referent, he is doing something that no user of a spoken language can do" (Lane, et al).

When hearing people learn sign, the first thing they learn (and unfortunately, often the last) is fingerspelling. Valli's "man" is how many Deaf children view their teachers and parents who do not learn sign. The man evokes a smothering American English language culture. In Valli's poem, fingerspelling is synecdoche for an oppressive, non-Deaf world.

Valli is a brilliant, inventive, and spellbinding signer. Of the three poems under discussion in this essay, this is the one in which explanation perhaps accomplishes the least, viewing the most. The level and beauty of Valli's signplay is also what sets this poem apart as such a powerful pedagogical tool —like learning English by reading Elizabeth Bishop.

As I said, several English translations of Valli's poetry exist, including a fine one by Raymond Luczak, included in Clark's *Deaf American Poetry* (also see Christie and Wilkins for an English translation of a different Valli poem, "Hands"). A few years ago, as an experiment, I gave a video and gloss of the poem to a friend who is an accomplished poet, teacher and scholar. My friend is hearing, and doesn't know ASL. I explained the poem to him, and pointed out things I considered interesting (similar to what I've written above). I asked him to try and translate the poem into English poetry. He made five translations, using slightly different styles (for example, one was a prose poem). Here's one: "Yellow Flower"

The wind rolls yellow flowers in the grass.
When a man sees them he grows angry,

Screams "Dandelions!"
He yanks them, mows,

Leaves the lawn perfectly green.

Watered by rain, warmed by the sun,
Roots stir beneath the soil.
Shoots poke through, yellow flowers bloom.
In the breeze bees dance among the waving plants.
Every night the flowers fold, at dawn open.
The yellow flowers become white puffs
Swaying in the wind
Until the man returns, "They're back!"
He uproots a dandelion
And the seeds scatter.

This isn't bad — the transformation of the second spelled English word is nice, and by using simple, unadorned English, it retains something of Valli's rhythm, representing the mood of Valli's gestural elegance. It also captures the sectionality of the poem. But if the measure of success of a poetic translation is the power, the artistry of a poem, this ultimately fails (no fault of my friend, who was a cheerful guinea pig in this experiment). Valli's poem is written in the air, not on the page.

Next?

ASL poetry presents difficult, maybe insurmountable problems for a translator. It is possible that conventional assumptions about poetic translation don't suffice. How then, to bridge the gap between this isolated poetry community and its larger hearing artistic cohort? The most obvious solution, learning ASL, is not a realistic option for most people.

Bimodality, the thing that separates ASL from English, is both essential to this poetry's beauty, and a hurdle to its accessibility. The typical poetic translation — a parallel poem which functions as stand-in for the original — may not really be appropriate. One thing we can all do, though, is watch and listen at the same time — something Flying Words Project relies on. Maybe a better approach towards appreciating this work includes something like what I've done here — a combination of viewing, explanation, gloss, and more conventional translation attempts.

The ubiquity of personal video recording devices combined with the Internet means that there are now few obstacles to seeing the originals, whether classic poems by Valli, or recent efforts by Flying Words Project, Ayisha Knight-Shaw and other amateur or accomplished ASL poets. Gallaudet University's young web-based Deaf Studies Journal includes poems (on video) in every issue. Perhaps "translations" might be "crowd-sourced" — bilingual glosses and explanations posted along with the poems themselves.

Regardless of the challenges of translating this work, it certainly behooves hearing and Deaf artists alike to get to know it, and to understand its history, techniques, and possibilities. The composer James Tenney used to imagine an alien race, after visiting Earth, and commenting on how strange it was that "humans seem to have fun by vibrating the air." As a musician, and as someone fascinated with ASL poetry, it seems to me art is art, whether it's handfuls or vibrations of air.

Santa Cruz, March, 2013

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from Poetry Is... by George Quasha and Russell Richardson: Poetry by Kenny Lerner and Peter Cook
http://the-open-space.org/poetry_is-lerner-cook/

poetry is (Speaking Portraits), vol. II*

(*by George Quasha)

Saturday June 6, 2015 at Anthology Film Archives
the work can now be viewed on: <https://vimeo.com/129744982>

Dawn, Barrytown: Charles Stein starts driving my car to Anthology Film Archives. He explains higher math for two consecutive hours—upon waking!— to say (this is the punch-line), “these structures are left behind for what Crowley calls The Abyss: where one becomes “a babe of The Abyss.” And THAT’s what Poetry Is! But instead of saying all that I did a sound thing.”

*

The nature of the Questioning of Poetry seems to evoke homogeneity in answerdom. That is: assuming George Quasha arranged for Poetry itself to ask these candidates, Poetry found answers all of a kind, so far as it was concerned (with exceptions). This relationship of Poetry to poetry (one which Charles Bernstein brought up in the first panel) holds the potential value of any given answer.

Kenneth Irby (who, as Bernstein pointed out, supplied the only non–Western answer) gives us a definition from the Chinese, “what the heart or mind is intent on, or through...” meaning the particular answer is answerable in one sense to the heart/mind, and finds justification there, as an expression of some desire: but also that it may be more useful to us in discovery than can be thought or planned; used for more generous purposes. Referring to an essay by D.H. Lawrence, Irby says that if the work of art were only what we thought we were making, it would be pointless. Irby answers “Poetry is...” with a non Indo-European language. The Subject-Predicate paradigm, if it can be said to function here, does not in any case reduce to the same implicit reality (supposing there is one) attended by Indo-European languages.

Robert Kelly's "squeeze out the ego."

Dorota Czermer: "Allow the words to dream themselves."

Alana Siegel's "talking" method and pseudo-anamnesis.

George Economou: "Once it starts from within it goes on with a life of its own."

David Wolach: "Constantly setting up and dissolving narrative themes."

Kimberly Lyons: "An invisible forcefield that we keep using, and that possibly uses us."

[Fortunately there are too many to quote.]

These seem more or less commensurate with "answering" as Irby has it... the analysand's capacity for articulation is frequently an index of the non-adherency of their inquiry, i.e. their allowance for any immediate discovery whatsoever rather than some form of mediation. (Why this is the case is beyond interest, but it's interesting to note.) English, however the given poet does it, is used in defiance of Gurdjieff's condemnation that it's only good for discussing the price of beef and the India Problem.¹ Or as Anselm Berrigan says: "[t]o perform [...] beyond just the basics of expression." The answers are the same to Poetry itself, yes, but sometimes Poetry finds itself discovered.

Why the preponderance of Romantic responses: "feelings," "magic," "magical," "it's like magic," "like kisses": what elicits these responses from poets, many of whom (statistically speaking) deck the halls with garlic to keep at bay what these words actually signify?

"These are these times," one might argue, "things don't tend to where they used to, the situation, politics, etc." This film (and Russell Richardson ought to be applauded for his contribution in the extremely thorny task of editing this into subtly symphonic watchability, regardless of the sacrifices that entails)– this film, in its most important implications, says otherwise.

–Pseudo Croche

7.16.15

*

¹ Note Robert Kelly's poem *QUASHA IS*, "He is a table crowded with seven kinds of bread," –available for listening on the Anthology Film Archives website.

I append this article by Tamas Panitz, by way of personal response:

DEFINITIONS

(333) *You cannot receive understanding unless you know first that you possess it. In everything there is again this sentence.*

—The Sentences of Sextus

*

The figures of love decamp from her rhyme: how is it they wait there foliate, hooved, half unborn?

*

Why are they only when you most feel: follow your own warmth in along night-winds asking?

*

If I touched you, like this, here: or if I lost my hand in what we thought was skin: if skin wasn't that at all?

*

Would the wet night streets be proven: would I be a street noisy with news of rain drummed on tin, coming with pieces, misapprehended flowers or frogs, maps that turn familiar in your hands?

*

Your body never ended we just forgot who was asking: the answer changed with every offer, it was a picnic along the Promethean cliffs, or were we hungry, or just the radiant remainder?

*

I'm in someone else's memory she said I think my turtle's cooked and climbed out from the center of the world into a Western dream still answerable to the warmth of her bed folded into the trees: so who was she, red dress at whose funeral, sounds like the wrong place, wrong time, she says *kiss me or we're in trouble*.

*

Logic is gruesome because humans are evil, the desire is what's redemptive: I dressed in all the skins too sincere to fool anyone, I was a row of lilacs, an old manor, the sky pretending not to fit its clothes: I let you remind me of more than I could bear.

*

The sentence follows the most fulfilling path: its syntax a landscape you once drove through, how did you ever forget your caravan was full of explosives; did someone hand you a flower?

*

You showed up in all your armor, another conspicuous: there was the green knight, waiting on the field, demand his name but what if there's a secret in your gorget, a word in your visor all those angles you only found by giving it away? Who is he not to ask you a question?

*

A tree doesn't remind you of anything: what if it leads you somewhere; if you were a ferryman where would you take me?

*

A tree in the guise of a man: the stranger stands at a sink, just stands there, letting the water rush over his hands, but where?

*

Once I heard the rain in one of my single-dome mosques as if each drop were from a different sky: now tell me, stranger, is not forgetfulness a quality of rain; don't I look like your father, just a little bit?

*

Who are you to chart the mysteries of the cosmos: did you ever feel naked; did you have wings before you tried to hide under them?

*

Did you ever watch an Ibis' reflection quiver on the wind in a bird bath: watch it drift toward the circumference, a sediment of attention— but whose?—carried by the nibbling ripples; did you think you could stare straight into the sun?

*

The hanging vines are in bloom: if you walk beneath them it will be wet; if I keep talking do I have a lover? Where does water come from?

*

Bone is a door, porous, though you can't feel it opening: there is a camel being bleached by the sun; see the vapor rise from it, how it tells you where to go?

*

A violet scarf unwinds forever: deep into your first touch, when lust is just a stranger; where does she lead you when you're already here, whose agenda are these bodied feelings?

*

They pretended skin couldn't remember: as if I weren't still there, waving my handkerchief from the shore, as if the wind were no financier.

*

Two birds fly parallel: news of the sky, that there is one; and lightning, do birds fly in lightning? Can you do both?

Angel of the Mourning:

Diamanda Galás and the Songs of the Oppressed

Kurt Gottschalk and Urania Mylonas

The public at large wasn't ready for Diamanda Galás in 1984. Another avant garde performance artist, Laurie Anderson, had gained notice with a chirpy video where she sang about her mother, airplanes and Superman. But that song had a sweet naivety to it, sung by a woman with spiked blonde hair and dimples. Galás was dark, both shamanistic and real. Her self-titled album that year seemed to come from the depths of hell.

But those in the know were already familiar with Galás's spirit. She might not have gotten airplay on the fledgling MTV the way Anderson's "O Superman" had, but her 1982 *The Litanies of Satan*, and in particular the 12-minute track "Wild Women With Steak-Knives (the Homicidal Love Song for Solo Scream)," had introduced her searing, multi-lingual rants and speaking in tongues to the world. By 1984's *Diamanda Galás* (later reissued as *Panoptikon*), the singer had gained a reputation for her prolonged, frightful incantations.

What listeners might not have recognized in 1984, however, and may not today, was that behind the screaming and behind the makeup Galás was invoking a rich history of singing about loss and tragedy.

The Litanies of Satan and *Diamanda Galás* both featured side-length sonatas for solo voice, affected by heavy use of reverb to create layered, nightmarish scenarios. But the b-side of *Diamanda Galás* was spun from a tradition – from Galás's own heritage, in fact – that may have been evident to few. "Tragouthia Apo to Aima Exoun Fonos – Song From the Blood of Those Murdered" is (at least in part) sung in Greek. The song references – in tone if not entirely in style – the Greek *amanadhes* and *mirologia* songs. Her delivery is raw and animalistic, certainly more impressionistic than those early 20th century folk songs, but the deep, mournful wail is still familiar. Galás opens the folk stylings up, adds her own personal pain, and sews them together again. But there are rips in the seams and the converging worlds of death and transformation collide in a vibrant cacophony.

Galás was invoking a musical history older than political boundaries, borne of the historical peoples of Asia Minor, or Anatolia – a region which has been home to Hittite, Phrygian, Lydian, Persian, Greek, Assyrian, Armenian, Roman, Georgian, Seljuk Turk and Ottoman peoples. But a history of cultural domination and political occupation, according to Galás, has resulted in the musical traditions melding and often being labeled "Turkish" under an empire where producing work which did not support the dominant culture could result in imprisonment.

"The music was claimed as Turkish music and the area was called "Turkey," she said. "People say 'oh, that's Turkish music,' and that doesn't mean anything ... that just means that it's the area in which the people lived who composed the music, and most of these people were slaves to the Turkish empires. They were slaves to the Ottoman empire. They were composers for the harem. They were composers for the sultan. And they were treated well if they were composing a lot of music but they still were considered second class citizens. They were forced to wear the fez.

"A lot of the Greeks who were forced to leave from 1914 to 1922, the Pontic Greeks who were the first who were executed, could only speak Turkish," she said. "They were not allowed to speak Greek and when they came to the mainland they were treated like second-class citizens by the Greeks themselves. They were called 'spiroturkos' which means 'sperm of the Turk,' so they were really penalized by all ethnic groups. They lived in open sewers – this was a very bad time, and it continued to the '30s, it continued to the '40s, the time in which Hitler was executing Jews in Thessaloniki which is also where the Greeks from Anatolia were living. So you have all these very very hard-bitten ethnic groups living in the same place. But a lot of these people shared the music, shared *amanas*, shared *rembitiko*".

Amanas is a form of song intended to communicate despair directly to God, she said. "People had different gods. Some of them were calling them by Byzantine names, some of them were calling them by Islamic names. This is not important for the musicians. They all got together and they smoked hashish and they played music together and they didn't care about all that, they were outlaws anyway in the society. Much of the music came out of prison. They didn't care about all these political things. But at the same time you have a historical legacy of musics that were composed by many different ethnic groups and the lie of Turkey is that this is Turkish music and this is why I insist on calling this music Anatolian music."

Those folk songs (not entirely dissimilar in style or tone from Portuguese fado) often concerned those left behind, the widows and orphans of war, the wives and children of men who had set to sea or had been imprisoned, or alternately the women left behind as young men immigrated to the United States in search of work. But the songs also delved into the mythological, sirens and mermaids tempting sailors (often to an unfortunate fate) being one recurring theme. In "Tragouthia Apo to Aima Exoun Fonos" from the 1984 album, Galás sings (in Greek):

*Mermaids, mermaids, give me your blackened hand
Jesus, why, why, why, why, why?
But I hadn't seen this!
Those black mermaids. [...]
Now I can see the truth!
And I see the hands of death!
Why do you attempt to escape?*

Galás's vocal delivery might have been a bit much for those Greek sailors and fishwives to take. But they would have understood. She sang like a possessed woman on behalf of the dispossessed, but all the while was in the tradition.

Galás grew up playing piano in her Turkish-Armenian father's band. (Her mother is Armenian and Syrian, and Galás herself identifies as Greek.) At age 10 she was playing military bases in his jazz band and accompanying his gospel choir, but the girl who would grow up to have a four-octave range wasn't allowed to sing. The only women who sing, her father told her, were whores. Her accomplishments as a pianist came swiftly. She played Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 1* with the San Diego Symphony at age 14 and earned bachelor's and master's degrees in performance from the University of San Diego. Before long she was backing such jazz players as Lawrence D. "Butch" Morris and David Murray in California and then New York.

But her reputation as a singer, and a politically outspoken one, was growing as well. In 1979, she sang the lead in Vinko Globokar's opera *Un jour comme un autre* with a libretto based on an

Amnesty International report on the arrest and torture of a Turkish woman accused of treason. Around that time she was also playing for women in New York City psychiatric institutions through a municipally-funded program. She would gain notoriety some years later with the 1989 release of her *Masque of the Red Death* trilogy and a 1990 concert at St. John the Divine in upper Manhattan, vocal pieces taking as their subject matter the AIDS crisis.

Speaking out on behalf of people with AIDS was still a radical gesture in 1990, especially for a woman presumably not at high risk of contracting the disease. (Galás's brother, the playwright Philip-Dmitri Galás, however, had died of HIV-related complications in 1986.) But it wasn't just her willingness to address controversial subjects that has made her such an intense figure, it was also her voice. Flying across four octaves, moving between languages and seemingly into an ecstatic glossolalia, she was part diva part demon, perhaps frightening but wholly mesmerizing. And as with, in a sense, those Greek immigrants not allowed to use their native tongue, as with the Turkish woman in Globokar's opera, Galás was singing for those who could not sing themselves. She even gave voice to those institutionalized women she had performed for in New York. Her dynamic 1994 album *The Sporting Life* (the closest thing she's come to a rock record, recorded with Led Zeppelin bassist John Paul Jones and Elvis Costello and the Attractions drummer Pete Thomas) includes her song "Baby's Insane," a slowly bouncing, Tin Pan Alley-styled ditty which features as its heroine a woman around whom knives oughtn't be left. It's slight, it's catchy and it's funny, but its humor isn't black. The song builds a tension between the fact that we want to escape this unnamed woman and the empathy Galás demands we feel for her. It's not so much funny as we just wish it was. The song has remained a staple of her concerts for years.

Sporting Life concluded with another song sung in Greek. "Hex" is a vocal workout performed on organ with the rhythm section that moves from invocation to incantation. The lyric is translated in the CD booklet, but the English doesn't really do it justice.

*I hated you so much
I wanted to kill you
but why should you become a martyr
and me a stranger in your foreign jail?
So now I wait for your old age and smile
while the alcohol
rips out your pretty teeth
and destroys your lovely skin.*

Their lyrics are hers, but again it's a sentiment the Greeks living in Turkey may well have shared some 80 years ago. She lets her enemy fall on his own sword.

Her delivery of the lyrics here is captivating, and the song seems to close the bracket opened with the deathwish and mariticide of the album's opening tracks. She soars above and swoops below the words, not quite singing them so much as encircling them. It's an album filled with death, and by the culminating "Hex" Galás' voice twirls through the melody like the audio equivalent of a dervish, wavering between semi-tones, and again linking Galás to her ancestral song. The mirolugia is characterized by a vocal melisma wherein the pitch is changed within a single syllable rather than the more measured Western style of words shaping the melody line. Music of many ancient cultures used melismatic chanting to elicit hypnotic trances during mystical rites and religious worship, and the quality is still found in much Jewish, Hindu and Muslim devotional music today.

Greek roots are also strongly apparent in Galás's 2003 song cycle *Defixiones, Will and Testament*. Excerpts from the Armenian Orthodox liturgy and traditional amanadhes and rembetika (another Greek folk form) songs can be heard alongside a mirroring of the improvisatory lamentations sung at Greek funerals, interspersed with poems by Greek refugees and old African-American spirituals. The title refers to warnings written on the gravestones of Greeks killed in Turkey warning that if the graves were dug up, then the culprit's daughter and her daughter would come to bitter ends.

Greek language and Anatolian tradition can be heard throughout her career, of course. And in a sense, she can be seen as defending the music against Turkish imperialism – speaking even on behalf of the songs themselves.

"All this disinformation, as a Greek you get used to it but you never overcome the hostility and hatred for disinformation and I for one happen to be one of those Greeks who absolutely will not put up with it," she said. "It's my legacy not to, because I wasn't born in Turkey so I didn't have to disguise myself through my dress, through changing my name to Turkish. I was born here [in America], so therefore I have the right to speak out without being executed."

In his *Journey to the Morea (O Moreas)*, the celebrated Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis (best known as the author of *Zorba the Greek*) wrote: "In the taverns, at festivals, on holidays, when they have had a bit to drink, the small businessmen and infantry officers [of the Peloponnese], so logical and selfish, break into melancholy eastern *amanadhes*, into a sudden longing; they reveal a psyche completely different from their sober everyday one. A great treasure, a deep longing..." The transformation of that pain into song is cathartic, healing and ultimately redemptive. The refugees of Asia Minor composed songs about their lost homeland, their lost loved ones, and their despair, and in so doing introduced rich musical styles to the world.

But boundaries change over time, people emigrate and powers shift. Ultimately for Galás the pedigree of the music isn't important – at least, not until there is a proprietary claim.

"We have to start to listen to music and we have to stop putting the politics in front of it because people breathe music," she said. "It's a nourishment of human beings. Who cares who the original owner is? But if we're not going to care who the original owner is then we have to share. When you steal a music from a person, from a culture, and you call it by another culture's name, you steal their spirit and you steal their soul. And when you do that, you execute them."

Quotes taken from interview on WFMU, originally aired 28 August, 2008.

Uncertainties

I

... this unique reading, each time the first reading and each time the only reading....

Maurice Blanchot¹

As a species humans love firsts. Firsts are to die for. We shape mind, mood, body, and wallet in order to get there first or be rewarded in top position. Best poem, bestseller, first lover.... With notable exceptions: *last* to die is usually number one on our lists; and in a different register: *last noticed*, *best spy*, *best con*, *best loan shark*, number one predation you can *bank* on.... And words? “First thought, best thought”? Well, it depends. We mainly pursue firsts that are *not yet present* but instead are distant, hard to get, lofty, beyond reach. When *first* means *present* it’s problematic. “This is the first moment of your new life” makes for anxiety, because it’s instantly untrue and instinctively we know that living firstness is challenging—in fact, it’s next to impossible to sustain for more than a special moment. A true paradox of the poetic may be that it both *presents* a language reality in immediate firstness and *extends* that lingual immediacy over time, so that intense temporality may become indistinguishable from *atemporality* or some form of hyper-temporality. Gertrude Stein brought heightened awareness to this paradoxical poetic reality in her theory and practice of *the continuous present*. Ezra Pound enlarged historical access in the present with ideas like “all ages are contemporaneous in the mind.” Robert Kelly variously exploits these and a number of other angles of *entry to time in a timeless present*, which he accomplishes *parapoetically*; that is, ever renovating his own poetics by prioritizing certain resources of language and consciousness only possible in a *poetics of singularity*—of *firsts* available in the [absolute present]. I bracket those words as anything truly parapoetic implies bracketed status, as *uncertainties*.

In 1973 Charles Stein and I initiated our long-contemplated project in dialogical criticism (DiaLogos) as a poet-centered exercise in “how to read” difficult work, focusing on issues important to a given poet whose work was in some sense hard to read.² For our engagement

1 “Reading,” transl. Lydia Davis, in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction & Literary Essays*, ed. George Quasha with Charles Stein (Station Hill Press: Barrytown, New York, 1999), taken from *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, transl. Lydia Davis, ed. P. Adams Sitney (Station Hill Press: Barrytown, New York, 1981).

2 A few years later, 1976, I wrote about the ideas behind this project in an extended piece, “DiaLogos: Between the Written and the Oral in Contemporary Poetry,” *New Literary History*, (Vol. VIII, number 3, 1976-1977), reprinted, minus the last section, in *Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse Toward an Ethnopoetics*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg, Diane Rothenberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); online at <http://www>.

with Robert Kelly that year the dialogue had a single focus which we already knew he shared with us: *ta'wil*, the historically significant exegetical practice among medieval Sufis like Avicenna and Ibn 'Arabi as presented by the great French scholar of Islam, Henry Corbin, celebrated by Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Robert Creeley, among others.³ We discussed the meaning of *ta'wil*, famously defined by Corbin as “the exegesis that leads the soul back to its truth,” as a unique event, a particular reading of a given text, rather than a procedural approach to conventional or dogmatically sanctioned understanding. Kelly emphasized the connection of *ta'wil* with “Recital” (*Récit*), as developed in Corbin’s *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*,⁴ which dealt with a species of narrative and therefore was appropriate to the text we elected to discuss in the dialogue: a section of the long poem *The Loom* from 1972.⁵ Kelly comments:

To work with one of those *Loom* sections, particularly that one [then #44, later changed to #36 in *The Loom*], would interest me because it has that other aspect of *ta'wil* in it—*Récit*, or whatever the Arabs call that, you know, the Recitals. I can’t think of *The Loom* in a better way than that; because when I want to find a type of *The Loom* somewhere, I find myself thinking about Avicenna in that Corbin book, and the stuff that’s like it elsewhere in the world—the endless and/or beautiful stories that spill themselves out of uncertain meaning—I mean the clear absence of final moral focus in the *Récit* reminds me very much of the same thing in *The Loom*. It is not the building of a *Temple*, but of an *Altar*, and that altar’s very ambiguous, and the whole relationship between myself and the skull is very curious. I mean I take the *récit* to be that kind of fable that cannot be paraphrased, and thus all the *récits* of Alchemy, which are, I suppose, as close to it as the West generally has—like the Thabritius and Beya stories, the people who go under the sea to teach the undersea people how to conjugate, or *The Chymical Wedding*. These are stories that must be read and the reading of them is itself the [alchemical] “operation.” (Vort, 114)

Uncertain meaning. The kind of fable that cannot be paraphrased. The récits of alchemy. The reading is itself the operation. These four interrelated notions, articulated in a single clarifying statement in the course of the conversation, point to important ongoing concerns in Kelly’s work and to what I’m calling a *poetics of singularity*. *Uncertain*

quasha.com/writing-2/on-poetry-poetics/dialogos/dialogos-between-the-written-and-the-oral.

3 “*Ta’wil* or How to Read: A Five-Way Interactive View of Robert Kelly,” published in the Kelly issue of *Vort*, #5, Summer 1974, 108-134; online at <http://www.quasha.com/writing-2/on-poetry-poetics/dialogos/tawil-or-how-to-read>. Others drawing upon Corbin include Gerrit Lansing, Kenneth Irby, and Theodore Enslin.

4 Engl. transl. Willard Trask, Bollingen Series LXIV, Pantheon Books: New York, 1960; French edition, 1954. This is the book that had been important to Olson, whereas Duncan, Creeley, and Kelly later also address *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, Engl. transl. Ralph Manheim, Bollingen Series XCI, Princeton Univ. Press, 1969. French edition, 1958; this later translation was not available to Olson (1910-1970).

5 In our dialogue the text is designated as “Section 44,” as it had been published in *Caterpillar* #18 (April 1972) and reprinted in *Vort* #5, but in the book *The Loom* (Black Sparrow Press: Los Angeles, 1975) it would become Section 36 [Building of the Temple], 401-415, the final poem in the book.

meaning: uncertainty is the matrix of the kind of *récit* that drives Kelly's visionary and unparaphraseable tale such that we find in much of *The Loom*—a rather dreamlike, non-ordinary personal process that seems performative of a ritual action of profound, initiatic, and transformative consequence, and yet does not map onto any identifiable religious or traditional dogma or procedure. It suggests a sort of unnamable genre that is said to fit the notion of *récit*; but what is a *récit*?

A story born of uncertain meaning, in Kelly's indication, implies that there is, and can be, no encompassing ideology that gives the story authority. The story therefore cannot be known in advance of its performative narrative action, at least not as it will now be known. The previously unknown and now unfolding story *acquires* a special kind of *authority* through the event of *authorship*, through the telling, the recital, the action of its own coming into being as writing. This is what makes it a *visionary* recital: it appears only inside the telling, inseparable from an individual's own necessity in performing its action, and without it that individual would not complete an aspect of self-realization—realization such that is not otherwise achievable than by the poem itself. It cannot be characterized by an abstraction referencing previous actions or authorized by literary, mythic, religious, or psychological precedent, because any such precedent would miss its singular necessity, its poetic ontology unknowable outside the action of its telling.⁶

It's important here to resist recounting or summarizing the action of Section 36 of *The Loom*, for according to the principle of *ta'wil* as described by Kelly, paraphrase of the narrative action impedes the real event by absorbing it in abstraction. And, to be sure, a reader of our dialogue "*Ta'wil* or How to Read" (1973) would optimally read the poem for the occasion; the purpose was to make vivid the full presence of *récit*, both as a text and as a *ta'wil*-like reading (the poet's, ours, a new reader's) in order to evoke the further unfolding of a *core principle*: a poetics of singularity.

To create a kind of meta-context for this principle I would point to two key notions. First, Charles Olson's insistence on a statement he treated rhetorically as a secret: *That which exists through itself is what is called meaning*. He slightly modified the phrase taken from the Taoist alchemical text discussed by Jung, as translated by Wilhelm/Baynes, *The Secret of the Golden Flower* ("That which exists through itself is Meaning (Tao)"); but the important shift was in taking the phrase from a context with extensive commentary and setting it in a context of poetics where, stripped of all reference, it points to the self-nature of performative language action. Here language is not functioning primarily as reference or communication but as a manifestation of being with a particular intensity of focus.

6 It may be unnecessary to point out that this is not a discussion of literary merit, aesthetic quality, or critical judgment as such, which is a relative matter of largely cultural-context evaluation and special consensus.

I'm not interested here in the question of influence, although Kelly of course has known Olson in depth from very early; perhaps we could shift the emphasis from influence to a context or field of *transmission* of a certain possibility: *the poetic as performative of singular action inseparable from how being itself means*. When Kelly takes *récit* from the context of extensive commentary in Corbin and lets it indicate his own uncertainty-narration, he performs an action parallel to Olson's transposition of a classic Taoist phrase to a radical redirection of poetry toward a *further nature*.⁷ The sense of the poetic as having such a profound and evolutionary role in human consciousness amounts to a poetic paradigm that puts the poetic act on a plane with Taoist and Sufi *text*, the purpose of which was to guide a reader's mind on a productive path of self-awareness *outside* dominant cultural, religious, or literary tendencies. Exactly what constitutes such a path and any given outcome inevitably remains uncertain.

Another meta-contextual frame to help us with *récit* is Maurice Blanchot's very special usage, which Kelly would not have been familiar with in 1973. Blanchot used the term to distinguish certain works, in fact most of his prose fiction, from the traditional story (*histoire, conte*) and novel (*roman*), and he characterized a *récit* as "not the narration of an event, but that event itself, the approach to that event, the place where that event is made to happen—an event which is yet to come and through whose power of attraction the tale [*récit*] can hope to come into being, too."⁸ Blanchot calls it "the secret law of the tale" which relates it to the unknowing we are discussing in terms of uncertainty as "a movement towards a point, a point which is not only not known, obscure, foreign, but such that apart from this movement it does not seem to have any sort of real prior existence, and yet it is so imperious that the tale derives its power of attraction only from this point, so that it cannot even 'begin' before reaching it—and yet only the tale and the unpredictable movement of the tale create the space where the point becomes real, powerful, and alluring."

That Olson and Blanchot invoke *secret* in presenting their radical core notions may acknowledge the difficulty of grasping their subtle force. I place them beside Corbin in the service of understanding something fundamental to Kelly's poetics and to show a basic uncertainty in the relation of their ideas to context: poetic, philosophically critical, and, in a rather special sense, esoteric. That is, everything depends on how we read, for the context itself is in the process of being revisioned.

In the same *ta'wil* dialogue, we say in the introductory statement:

During our talk with Kelly we tried to get him to speak about the new poetics emerging, say, in

⁷ Olson's poignant phrase "further nature" occurs in the "Proem" in "MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN—I" in *Maximus Poems* IV, V, VI (Cape Goliard Press: London/Grossman Publishers: New York, 1968); and in *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George Butterick (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1983).

⁸ "The Song of the Sirens," trans. Lydia Davis, op. cit.

the year 1950. After all, that was the year of “Projective Verse,” Concrete Poetry, etc. But Kelly insisted that “the interesting date would not be the first time that something was written, but the first time that somebody is able, say, to read Basil Valentine or Paracelsus as a *processual* document, rather than as a guide to operations with crucibles, and that date is probably after 1950.... The issue that I’m at is *when we were able to read*... and I think that our history will have to concern itself less with when a thing gets written than when a thing gets read, because I think those are the moments of achievement in our consciousness.” We [GQ & CS] had been talking for a couple of years about the right strategy in writing a “How to Read” book appropriate to the ’70’s, but it had not occurred to us to plot the history of consciousness in terms of how to *read* specific texts. Kelly argued that “someone who had read and perceived ‘Projective Verse’ and some other [of Olson’s] essays, ‘The Gate and the Center’ for instance, would be in a position to read anew. It strikes me that Pound had called it *The ABC of Reading* and before that *How to Read*... [but] that critics have supposed him really to be saying ‘how to write’.... If there is any art or future in criticism, such that the work we’re immediately concerned with can ever get read, or the thing that makes your book *America a Prophecy* [GQ co-editor with Jerome Rothenberg; Random House: New York, 1973] possible, will be a new method of reading, not a new method of writing.”

I remember Robert Duncan speaking about how he and Olson created a poetry that had to be read at the level of its poetics. I took this to mean that, while poetry clearly can be read in many ways and have very different functions for different readers (often context specific), they insisted on a *level* of reading that is inseparable from the kind of thinking in language—the *language-living*—that generates the poem. What is at stake is not only “change” from the perspective of literary history, or formal innovation, but what Olson insisted on calling “a stance toward reality,” an orientation toward what is taken to be otherwise (without, that is, the action of the poem) an unknown dimension of reality. That dimension is reflected and engaged as a language reality, a *linguality*. Our access to it is by reading in a way that meets the poem at its own level of action, and for Kelly (1973) that way of meeting the *récit* of *The Loom* is named *processual*. One does not so much circle the poem mentally to appreciate its perfections and tease out its stylistic devices as *undergo* its narrative process, including circumambulating its interior constructions, a perhaps proto-ritualistic but unsanctioned action, engaging its continuous present as one’s *own*.

A reading of this process as *ta’wil* may have psychological and indeed variously cultural force, but the emphasis is on where and how it leads one to a further access to un-lived reality that is now, and only now as a result of the narrative process, one’s own. It’s an initiatic event in the sense that, having crossed a *readerly* threshold, by virtue of an engage-able poetics, one is now *of* the poem, no longer who one was, but a further oneself. This does not mean that one becomes the “self” of the particular poet (as perhaps one does in

an empathic reading of a very personal poem) but one enters a self-otherness in a sense equivalent to that which the poet entered by way of the *récit*. And this is not a matter of interpreting the particular poem as such, or assigning an interpretation or meaning to the poem, although of course the process may include meanings of all kinds, but of awakening a zone of continuing resonance which the *récit* imparts, an event of transmission of possibility. It can be associated with any number of related textual realities but it does not *belong* to a separately defined context (religious, literary, psychological, etc.). Its ontological status remains open, that is, uncertain.

Reading as *ta'wil*, in the non-traditional way emphasized by Kelly in relation to *The Loom*, yet nevertheless related to the way Corbin tracks the practice in Avicenna's "Recitals" which was attractive to so many poets, foregrounds the importance of being in step with the compositional principle of a given text. The "how to read" is tied in with the way of writing and in a sense conveys a permission of *reading as further writing* intrinsic to a poetics of singularity: a readerly event that is also *writerly* far more than literarily interpretative. To the extent that reading processually is initiatic to a reorientation within personal vision, a reader takes on the compositional possibilities opened by the text. And this gives special importance to any auto-exegetical commentary offered by the poet directly, which in fact was the theory behind our exercises in dialogical criticism. Consider Kelly's remarks about the way of working in *The Loom*:

What's interesting is the way in which the Recital comes... A Recital chooses *one* seed to grow from, and all the other seeds do not. Now I could be left in a kind of typical lyrical impasse with all of the seeds and wanting to tend all of them and have them *all* grow and rush from flowerpot to flowerpot, as indeed I have done in lots of poems and in the way, say, Duncan always does, thus letting *no* seed go untended, until it all comes up in an odd, approximative kind of garden. But what happens constantly in *The Loom*—well, not constantly, but lots of times—is that the Recital begins, and the Recital which seems to be developing only *one* seed turns out by the time it's finished (and I look back at it) to have developed *all* the seeds. And it's *all* there. And I stand in awe of that narrative process. Because that's really the first time that I came to *know* about the spontaneity of narrative. I mean of course certain kinds of narrative *do* tell themselves—fantasies or dreams or whatnot—but to have the power expressing itself right in the moment of one's conscious, most alert activity, where I'm thinking about vowels and it's thinking about what's going to *happen*, seems to me so extraordinary....

Spontaneity of narrative. Narratives tell themselves. The power expressing itself right in the moment of one's conscious, most alert activity. What the poet is indicating here, if we allow our understanding to align with his sense of compositional event, is the way in which *récit*—the telling that occurs on its own and without authorization or premeditation—has the same *firstness* for the poet that it has for the poem's reader. Poet and reader have a

similar ontological status as recipients of a telling. The statement of the text is “objective,” not with respect to a world truth or outside status report or interpretability according to any sort of standard of correctness, but by a *shared and willing uncertainty that is an openness to what is ready to be told*. *Objective* as an object one agrees to hold in common. The “message” is the *state of receptivity itself*, the realization that telling is what happens when we declare ourselves receivers, listeners, readers. The *ta’wil* is the intentional participation in what is active on its own, what in Greek grammar (a mood lost in modern languages) is designated as *middle voice* (neither active nor passive) and is the voice in which, traditionally, the epic poem begins, the poet’s declaring oneself to be in the state of request for the song. (Obviously the conventional “Sing, Muse” doesn’t capture the mood.) The art of subtle receptivity is an evolutionary process, and accordingly it’s a practice that is refined over time. It may even be *the* state of what is increasingly recognized as *conscious evolution*. At any rate it indicates a way of being with unfolding narration that applies equally to *poet* writing who is also reading the self-telling and *reader* who is also within a writing unfolding process. It is an event that is always happening the first time ever. And first-time things are profoundly uncertain.

II

In our 1973 dialogue with Kelly we bring up his having spoken of the process of the poem as “*ta’wil* of its own first line.” This striking notion extends the way he was speaking, as cited above, about the Recital telling itself. It implies that the initial gesture unfolds as a reading out of its own “seed,” and it can do this because, it seems, the *whole* is coinherent with the *part*. First gesture, first line, first word, first sound—they are of the same nature, the substance of the telling, corresponding to a level of intensified awareness that opens to an unknown event. It is not a matter of development, as conventionally a plot develops a story or a book develops a theme. Unfolding is different from development. A Visionary Recital, the *récit*, is a process of appearance, of something contained in the nature of a thing that *is*, now coming into appearance. It may show up somewhat the way recalling the dream instructs the conscious mind in what it hasn’t yet seen in itself. But the unfolding telling is happening without the mind going unconscious in order to be receptive to what it can’t ordinarily bring up or let come forth, and in fact it is happening in the state of greatest alertness. This in itself is a non-ordinary state in an ordinary waking context, which context, however, is subtly reoriented by the event—a disturbance of the ordinary that calls for the extraordinary act designated by *ta’wil*. On this model *ta’wil* implies that non-ordinary text can be journeyed through, initiatically and transformatively, in what looks like ordinary

reading, a literary act, but which, in the nature of text with consequential poetics, effects a reorientation of reading itself as a singular and incomparable event.

Jumping ahead to a text written nearly four decades after *The Loom* and which bears the name of our recurrent theme, *Uncertainties*,⁹ we seem initially to be looking at an opposing poetics. *Uncertainties* appears to be a non-narrative series of 125 numbered and untitled poems of irregular length, which are discontinuous and non-unified in theme and detail. The single regularity is what stands in for a formal principle: it is written in two-line stanzas in which each line is more or less self-contained.

Preceding the main text, in the place of a dedication or part title, is an expression of the core desire of the book:

tout dire

Perhaps the great aspiration of being incarnate as poet: *to say it all*.

Next page, still preceding the main text, a short prelude poem declares:

Speak language

*the way thunder does,
all the words at once*

*what lingers
turns slowly into meaning*

*meaning is not what you think
meaning is what stays*

The book opens with a double valence, a twist of the grammatical axis: It speaks, first, to itself, in the presumption of a kind of intimacy: Speak in *language* the way thunder does in *all sound together* (beyond a mission of controlled or consensual human discourse). At the same time it *addresses* language, sounding an approximation of the middle-voice mood of epic, an invocation to language itself as if the muse has gone inside the physical mouth, and conjures speech with a trans-comprehensible noise of wild nature (like the thunderclap of *Finnegans Wake*) to say all with all words at once, cultivating faith in meaning as residue of a slow process of transmutation within apparent chaos. Implicit is the view of language as self-organizing matrix, a field of intelligence, to which access is by permission gained in a state of release, trust in surrender to the telling. The species of lingual intimacy is both

9 Station Hill of Barrytown (Barrytown, New York: 2011).

personal and impersonal, embedded in what is.

The main text of the book is that slow process. It begins with an unexpected connection to *récit* now in the absence of story on the grand scale:

1.

Tell it just enough to begin

then the form takes over and tells

The will of the poet to inhabit the state of the poem is only a spark to jumpstart a self-generating process. The “form” that assumes the power of speech is, on one level, little more than a limit of irregularity, a neutral container with no assigned value, no privileged nobility of formal or aesthetic accomplishment, barely a source of legality as governor, and yet an opportunity for measure within variability of the self-accounting voice.

The speaking text—half-forgetting the name Robert Kelly in this call to language itself, yet language as intimately inhabited—is aspiring to the condition of *all-speaking*, occupying a sort of midpoint between Adam of the Garden and the Tower of Babel. This is not language as abstract system (linguistics) but as bodymind membrane, liminal, that is, to the autonomous magical power of a sovereign human creator and a common social property uncontrollable in its infinite variability. It’s as if poetry is a zone in which “two truths”—body & mind, person & world, this & an *other* dimension, ordinary & non-ordinary language—are in play & at play, and meaning is the residue of any complete action thereof. And an activity of the midpoint, middle voice, limen: the speaking that occurs in the surrender of message-control, letting go of the core habit of a dominator culture built on certainty.

What does it mean to call a book *Uncertainties*? Needless to say it’s uncertain, but not in the sense of a poet confused, indecisive, tentative, or indefinite. Also not in the sense of literary ambiguity, however many types you can count; not, that is, poetry as rhetoric. We might consider it as indicating a willingness to be as uncertain as things are, and not necessarily in a negative sense; it’s not a lament or any personalized mood of receptivity re: the problematic of unpredictability. On this plane of meaning, the personal response, it might better be seen as an alignment with the world on its own terms; to be in step with what is never fully in step until *you* are. Poem as specific alignment in process, so to speak. The poem inside the moment happening, then, is a medium for exposing what is otherwise invisible, the maneuver of bodymind to maintain a certain upright balance amidst perceived attractions and torrents of the day. One name for this perceptual process is *proprioception*, “self-knowing,” applied, with some license, to verbal events, as a sort of lingual register of how a being knows and maintains itself in spacetime. Yet it’s not strictly personal; in fact

it's interactive with the world, something happening between.

One of the Uncertainties (cap to acknowledge unique qualities) is the status of identity. It's rather hard to allow a poet with the name Robert Kelly the space of "open identity" which requires momentarily forgetting that he's the author of many dozens of published books; that is, to read him as he writes himself free from who he already is. But this is notoriously difficult where identity is considered cumulative, which is why poetry—especially a poetry where the poetics values uncertainty—verges on the impossible in the sense of its most radical possibility: to come upon singularity. The mind tired out by the school of hard knocks, literature as the crowning achievement of a culture of comparative assessment, and the pursuit of identity status can barely resist evaluating according to the abstraction du jour (Modern, post-Modern, etc.), and trying to make out the stripes of the home team. It's only human. The will to be first. Identity as certainty.

What, then, is the way into the Uncertainty poem as it is to itself?

28.

Meshes mean me the voices
family matters murder the ear

I am deaf from sheer neglect
the snow perishes hence is beautiful

men ask women for the time of night
men don't know women are the sun herself

it's all about hiding and being found
all the rest of culture is a battered rose

we are stronger than war we can give it a name
to have seen with own eyes Danube's Iron Gate

leaving the sea behind came to this brown hill
the opposite of everything

Uncertainties

he took the long-stemmed rose and pounded it on the table
spread its petals and found food he gave to a child

we are nourished by mysteries alone
calm this morning like a book you read before.

One way to track a work is to look for its very own poetics. Where there is no discernible tradition-based prosody, procedure, concept, or theoretical dogma, we might allow a given textual process a *parapoetic permission* by which it defines its “rules” as a singular dynamic. I’ve been calling it here, ad hoc and sui generis, an Uncertainty poem, written it seems in flexible units: numbered sections made up of a variable number of two-line stanzas in distinct (more or less separate but linked) lines, wherein, so to speak, the deuces are wild. They *contain* but somewhat like corkless bottles as stopovers for genii in passage.

The poem does not progress; it lives along. The journey home is uncertain, perhaps in the sense of the Taoist classic: *The land that is nowhere, that is the true home*. Speaking from where it is, it can say: Today poetry doesn’t quite know what it is. And so it feels its own “true,” its ways of being true to its moment, with no room for apologies. How long it takes to reach a fecund not-knowing and offer no resistance to sudden awareness, that’s how long the poem is *in every line*. And every line is a site of possibility only available as singularity.

The mind can’t help trying to say something true. Nothing wrong with that, unless it *believes in what it says*. We become fundamentalists of our own constructions. Perhaps poetry is what saves us from ourselves, from our continuous surrender to the siren of our own voice claiming to tell the truth. The will of the poem to continue, to keep coming back, to leave behind the already said—a rescue mission from a part of the mind that knows better. But this too is uncertain.

2.

Smart ones would tell you too much
be a mirror until you break

be a tumbler till you fall
fill or drown, just be unsure

uncertainty is all and your appeal
the way your eyes so steady are clear

while your fingertips are roving
through the frantic jungle of what you really mean

The present is the greatest uncertainty—the precarious edge over the abyss below. “Form” here is not a wall of protection against unintelligibility or an aggressive instrument of reform, analysis, satire (social, psychological, political...), which presumes intellectual certainty and a standard of correctness (inheritance of 18th century “Age of Enlightenment” values), but a sort of valve for release of the unknown “through the frantic jungle of what you really mean.” Its social/political function is to clear linguality of false occupation and the coercive discourse of control. In this view the distracting, dubiously intentioned, controlling duplicity of public discourse, limiting freedom of mind and being, exploits an absence of actual complexity and subtle polyvalence of language. Discursive health requires the self-true multiplicity that speaking bears when we allow it to show itself. A moment of true speech contains more than we know how to hear, but the poem hears more.

The embrace of multiplicity shows it to be far more than a rhetorical strategy or proliferation of effects. It’s a discipline of the mouth obedient to the *more* that mind can say. The art of poetic *aporia*—the intrinsically unresolvable because replete with variable yet irreducible mental directives—is a reality challenge, a state of presence within complexity, and its access is rooted in acknowledged doubt and uncertainty. In the realization of the Uncertainty poem it’s a call, not to resolve or explain, but to stand within the oscillations of possible meaning until mind knows a sudden and necessary *sense of the present moment*. Meaning as a residue of the process of engagement does not detract from the intensity of self-aware presence.

In a parallel to the contribution of Corbin to the poetics of *récit*, another scholar of Islam and a range of medieval ontological hermeneutics, Michael A. Sells, brings traditional perspective to a poetics of apophasis that goes beyond rhetorical denial, often associated with so-called “negative theology.” He shows a tendency in mystical writing (Plotinus, Eriugena, Ibn ‘Arabi, Porete, and Eckhart) where saying the unsayable is worked through apophasis as saying/unsaying (“speaking away”). “Genuine *aporia*,” he states, “instead of leading to silence, leads to a new mode of discourse.”¹⁰ I’m interested in how such an approach can help us see wherein a poetics of singularity is connected to a profound problematic of language-thinking, with a range of historical antecedents outside what is

10 *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1994), 2.

usually considered literary history, and how it has led to many practices of saying/unsaying and what I call *further saying*.

Further saying in this sense is more than avant-garde innovation and experimentalism, but it can be that too; I think, for instance, that Alfred Jarry's 'Pataphysics, the "science of imaginal solutions," understood as a poetics of singularity, has broad implications that go beyond any particular exploitation of them (such as OuLiPo). One could read aspects of Kelly's *Uncertainties* as at once in an alignment with the 'Pataphysical and with a tradition of apophasis, and both as modalities of dealing with the always newly unsayable requiring further language invention in step with mind-opening initiation. They lead to new ways of reading in which passage through the text is "the operation," the alchemical working that alters both the possibilities of reading and consciousness itself—"be a mirror until you break//be a tumbler till you fall/fill or drown, just be unsure...." Uncertainty could be viewed as something like a Nigredo stage within the alchemy of reading, and its recognition can help discover a power of the *mind-degradable* within discourse. Such a power makes our need for positive assertion, the kataphatic or "bringing down" the elusive real into speaking, a constructive possibility of the moment which, by virtue of sustained transformative intensity, is reabsorbed into the open processual.

Blake gave us permission to escape the "mind-forg'd manacles" of belief while remaining *poetically* respectful of our acts of faith and attachment: *Every thing possible to be believ'd is an image of the truth*. Truth in poetry is viewed as a multiplicitous play of images, indeed a species of *play*, not a hierarchy of more or less valid truth claims. Perhaps in the Uncertainty poem we are at the threshold of a Blakean *ta'wil*: Any possible reading in poetic process is an *imaging* of meaning as a poem's truth. Reading is itself the alchemical operation *and* its ludic enhancements.¹¹

37.

To rise without compunction
into a day without a word
all travel tunnels through my thought
stay home glad sunlight dim in amber
licking shadows of travelers off the wall
Atlantis rises in our houses (...)

One's life stand as Atlantis the always-disappearing continent, the Atlantean condition of our islanded living, the day empty of language calling us out, all times contemporaneously

11 Peter Lamborn Wilson refers to "serious joke" as "alchemical term," applicable to art, in "Magi-ism," *Alchemy & Inquiry: Phillip Taaffe, Fred Tomaselli, Terry Winters*. (Exhibition catalog: Wave Hill: April 3rd-June 19th, 2011, Bronx, New York). The likely source is from 1611: *Jocus Severus, A Serious Joke*, Michael Maier, transl. Darius Klein (Seattle: Ouroboros Press, 2010).

tunneling through the mind, poem pulling into disjunctive time where thinking enters into a continuous present.... *Zero point poetics*—the return to unknowing—is the state required for singularity, wherein we do not accumulate meaning but “rise” to its possibility “without compunction.” By reinstating us to zero as instantaneous *still point*, line-by-line the poem teaches *emptiness* (*shunyata*) as the openness of reality, its intrinsic capacity to be lived without preconditioning, the possibility of speaking *between* ourselves and the world/others. Here the poem instructs—restructures—how being emerges into the new by way of a new linguality.

If there were a persistent rhetoric behind the lines it would be something like a *charm*—a quasi-intelligible language act performative as magical operation, a reordering of syllables to tempt the tongue into sovereign behavior driven by a will to change. However, the intention—the aim of the charm—remains sub-intelligible and polyvalent.

57.

Day of quarrel no man tiger knife knife
spill an island off your chest and spit

Micro-narratives with instant *récit* force open out as fleeting *ta’wil*, meaning on the fly. Story unfolds in the instant, turns upon a split-second axis, and moves on to a new grip through renewed traction. If there is mimesis in complexity it is revelation as *aporia*, nature as *linguality* in its mode of operation. The spin, genetic shifting as axial force in the releasement of a constantly moving center, regenerates discursive energy. Mind asserting and apophatically taking back or cutting off leaves a residue of poetic meaning with traces in the reading mind. It wakes in what it finds and lets go.

The two-line stanza (as distinct from couplet), according to the poet, sets up “experiments in duration, in complex syntax and melodic demands.”¹² The sense of continuity derives not particularly from content as such but from how the “melody of the first line necessitates the melody of the next. Shape shaping shape.” Melody here functions as “*ta’wil* of the first line,” that is, the principle of unfolding in which a thing realizes its further nature in the way it goes on, staying in step with itself freshly responsive, as opposed to getting ahead of itself by following prescription. He acknowledges constraint at the level of a line’s desire to be itself: “each line wants to be semantically intact”; “yet it also must link syntactically or narratively with the line that follows”—sovereignty subjected to inevitable variability. And stanzas stand “in relation” with those before and after, but that relationship is quite open—a neighborhood where most anything can happen, and does.

12 Robert Kelly’s comments on the poetics of *Uncertainties* are recorded on the book cover.

Uncertainties

54.

Follow your own femoral artery long enough
you'll find yourself in the body of another person

this sometimes called love was called by the ancients the Red Thread
stitches life together with itself you wake in the mountains

the girl brings you small gentian flowers you go on sleeping
she says Spring is here and you dream Old Persian verbs

"Hypersyntax, where phrases link with what comes before or after, or plausibly stand alone" are "strategies in 'mental strife'" —attractors of a state of *mental warfare* which Blake opposes to *corporeal warfare*. Robert Kelly wishes the poem in its mind-degradable axiality to "solicit the dissolving of certainties—in between the inbreath and the outbreath, where nothing is fixed, and freedom begins."

All lines are first lines, and lines are *ta'wil* of themselves—self-accounting, self-regulating like Blake's bird that never soars too high if he soars with his own wings—a surge of language in autopoiesis of a single line. Or, in two-line stanzas, co-self-organizing in mutual pairing in a field of such co-piloted flight patterns.

Poems as Uncertainties declare an order in process, the track of their moving forward, the actual order of composition, not programmed or symbolic order and yet not arbitrary; a self-organizing, its own necessity wherein poems in fact can be read in any order without disrupting the overall sense of the work. That's its spacetime reality: go anywhere, know anything, in your actual *own time*. The public signs are non-paranoid: *If you see something, write something*. It's a poetics that continuously points back to the singularity of readerly configuration. Reader furthers the reading which is writing. Poem as matrix of world reconfiguration. And it's a world without censorship, beyond dogma, without arbitrary control, where taboo cannot get a foothold, and desire is never made less than what it is—desire. And all our secret personal fundamentalisms dissolve into breath.

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Mysterious and Therefore Useful:

Composer Indeterminacy and Christian Wolff

Christian Asplund

I have long desired a means of analyzing indeterminate scores with the same probing rigor that has characterized the best analyses of tonal and atonal determinate scores. The indeterminate works of Christian Wolff in particular have always felt (to quote Cage) “mysterious, and therefore... useful,”¹ “for people who want... to change their thinking about music.”² They challenge the concept of what constitutes a piece. Many details may vary from performance to performance, including the sounds and the way they are combined. Before encountering this repertoire, I assumed that the choice of sounds and their combination defined a composition. Wendy Reid, a composer who has spent much of her compositional life writing a series of so-called “Tree Pieces,” which are notated from the bottom of the page up, begins from the assertion that art should imitate nature in her manner of operation.” The idea is probably as old as music. Certainly the organic model that we are familiar with from Beethoven, through Wagner, Brahms, and Schoenberg, is based on one interpretation of this premise. In the organic model two contrasting but related ideas couple and bear fruit that is a similar but transformed version of the original ideas. This organic model is evident in sonata form, in which two contrasting themes duke it out and finally reconcile and join forces. This form is, moreover, a manifestation of the thesis-antithesis-synthesis dialectic that has so profoundly influenced western thought.

But the organic model is a *representation* of a natural process. Wendy’s pieces were more imitative than representational. The idea that started to develop in my mind was of a composition that actually did produce musical performances in the way that a seed produces a tree. I used to live on the corner of Locust and Elm Streets and had a fairly large Locust tree in my front yard that was a favorite climbing spot for children in the neighborhood. The street name inspired residents and the city arborist to plant Locust trees along the street. Each is identifiable as a Locust, but each is unique in such details as size and shape. The same species might develop very differently on another street, in another climate, yet the essential “locustness” is still there. The tree is all the more beautiful for the way it adapts and responds to its surroundings. I think it is delightful how one limb has grown differently in response to having a rope swing hanging from it. In years to come, perhaps the little notch, and the way it has affected the tree’s growth will carry pleasant memories.

In the same way, performances of Wolff’s *For 1, 2, or 3 Players*, and John Zorn’s *Cobra*, among other compositions, derive their identity, not from an overall shape, but from the smaller scale shapes derived from prescribed processes, and the types of overall shapes created from the smaller ones.

1 James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 147.

2 John Cage and Morton Feldman, *Radio Happenings I-V: Conversations* (Cologne, 1993).

Nature seems quite particular about its smallest building blocks and processes, but somewhat laissez-faire about the large-scale shapes they form. This same delicate relationship is evident in many indeterminate works. It is a relationship that makes the repertoire resistant to traditional analysis, particularly that subset of works that is open in form. Traditional analyses rightly describe unfolding of events in linear time, as represented in a score that is very specific as to the initiation and cessation of events, their sequence and simultaneity. Open form pieces may have many possible temporal realizations. Moreover, pieces whose events themselves are contingent on performative processes do not even provide a consistent collection of objects to analyze. David Behrman overcomes these problems in an evocative analysis of Wolff's *Duet II* for horn and piano by transcribing a realization of an excerpt.³ But even this is of a passage that has a somewhat determined sequence of events. DeLio describes and categorizes the different types of notation used in *For 1, 2, or 3* in detail and then interprets the overall impact of the piece, especially in terms of performativity⁴. Both analytic approaches are illuminating, but applicable to a specific piece. I felt that my method would need to work with any score, without having to refer to realizations, and that, rather than simply describing notations that can be readily examined in a score, it should make generalizations about notations that would reveal deeper resonances or contrasts between scores.

The first step is to define what a score is or does. In a critique of traditional musical roles, Cage said that "a composer is simply someone who tells other people what to do."⁵ Based on my experience, I would revise the definition to, maybe, someone who pleads, begs, or bribes someone else to do something. A healthier view might define a score as something used by performers to make music. Music is made by performers, not by composers. And no performance, however faithful or authentic is a perfect realization of a score, because a score is not a piece of music. A score is something, in the form of information, which performers may use to make music. Scores have also served as representations of music for highly skilled individuals. But this secondary function sometimes clouds the true nature of a score, especially since representations are themselves fictions.

The next step is to decide what portion(s) of music to analyze. Traditional analyses focus on movements, or single movement compositions. There is nothing preventing the analysis of larger or smaller chunks, however. We could begin with the largest unit of music, which might be the totality of music made by humankind, past, present, and future. From there we could go to smaller units: periods, genres, collections, complete works of a composer, and on down to pieces, movements, sections, phrases, motives, notes, and sounds. In linguistics, it has been found useful, from a modernist standpoint, to isolate the smallest units of language and build up from there, thus the morpheme, the smallest unit of meaning, and the phoneme, the smallest unit of spoken sound. In musical performance, one might posit three smallest units: the noteme, or smallest unit of notation; the soneme, or smallest unit of sound; and the acteme, or smallest unit of action.

The third and most difficult task is to define the parameters of music. The traditional parameters, pitch, rhythm, dynamics, etc., seem a bit imprecise and specific to western classical music. Varese reformulated the parameters when he described himself not as a composer, but as "a worker in rhythms, frequencies, and intensities,"⁶ meaning that these three describe both the properties of sound complexes (frequency and intensity which also yield timbre) and temporal order and duration. A further refinement might eliminate frequencies, since frequency is itself rhythm on a micro level. This would yield two parameters: rhythm and intensity. Unfortunately, these parameters, however rigorous, do not address some fundamental

3 "What Indeterminate Notation Determines," in *Perspectives on Notation and Performance*, ed. Benjamin Boretz and Edward T. Cone (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1976), 74-89.

4 "Structure As Behavior," in *Circumscribing the Open Universe* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 49-68.

5 John Cage, *A Year from Monday* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), pp. ix-x.

6 Varese, Edgard, and Chou Wen-chung, "The Liberation of Sound," *Perspectives of New Music* 5, no.1 (Autumn-Winter 1966), 11.

properties of a musical performance. These are when, where, and by whom a piece is to be performed.

Ultimately, I think that parameters could be chosen and tailored by an analyst to suit a particular repertoire or piece of music. This will be especially true of analyses of traditional musics that seek to absorb some of their cultural context. But the following breakdown provides a fairly complete and efficient field for describing any music from a culturally (inasmuch as it is possible) neutral (or modernist) point of view. We begin with the premise that most scores specify, in one way or another three things: material, order, and duration. The term material is used to signify not only individual sonemes, but any combinations of them (motives, phrases, etc.), as well as other non-sound events that may occur in a composition. Usually material is placed in a certain order and given (relative) durations. There are scores in which the composer leaves one or more of these open. “End” from Cage’s *Living Room Music* gives durations and order, but does not specify what instruments to use, other than that they are to be everyday objects. Earle Brown’s, Stockhausen’s, and Boulez’s mobile form pieces provide phrases of determinate duration, but their order is left open. And many compositions, from Gregorian chant to 1960s Feldman, provide ordered sequences of pitches with little or no durational specification.

The temporal parameters⁷ of music may be categorized as follows:

Rhythm:

Order

Duration

We may wish to get more specific about “material.” And this is where we may wish to tailor our parameters to specific pieces. Nonetheless, most scores may be handled with the following, viewed as “subparameters” of material:

Material:

Timbre

Pitch

Intensity (Volume)

The timbre parameter is considered separately from instrumentation in that the timbre parameter (in my formulation) has to do with timbral manipulation within a given instrumentation. Intensity is the same as volume, or “dynamics.”

Finally, we come to the most basic and yet most esoteric parameters of a score, contained under the heading, context.

Context:

Spatial Locus (Location, “where”)

Temporal Locus (Beginning time/date, “when”)

Participants (Folks--performers, audience, others)

Instrumentation (including voices, etc.)

7 With the recognition that all parameters of music are temporal.

Context parameters appear in order from general to specific, but obviously the one most often specified in scores is instrumentation. Spatial locus, or the place where a piece is performed and the directions to which sound is projected, is usually left open by the composer, but there are many exceptions. Alvin Curran's *Maritime Rites* is an example of a piece that has been composed for a specific Spatial Locus, Sydney Harbor (Australia), using ship horns among other things. Earle Brown's *Chambers* specifies the types of spaces in which the piece may be performed. Many more traditional pieces are designed to be performed in specific types of locations such as cathedrals, smaller halls ("chamber music"), and theaters. Temporal locus, or, more specifically, the starting time of a composition, is likewise not usually specified by composers. But there are many sacred compositions that are intended to be performed at specific times in a liturgical calendar. Indian ragas have specific times of day in which they should be played. The participants' parameter indicates that composers may specify specific people, animals, or robots, or types thereof that may perform, witness, or otherwise be involved in a composition. One example of this is Nam June Paik's "Etude for Piano," which instructs the performer to cut John Cage's necktie with scissors. Sun Ra and Duke Ellington were famous for writing instrumental parts for specific performers. Ra even claimed that those not specifically authorized to play his compositions could not play them successfully, saying that it was forbidden to do so.⁸ Less esoterically, many compositions may specify performance by a certain type of person (i.e., a virtuoso, or a beginner), for a certain type of audience (initiates of a specific religious tradition, school children, hospital patients, etc.).

The instrumentation parameter introduces the field of modernist open-instrumentation compositions, which is of particular interest here. It should be noted that, in the context of human music-making, or even historical Euro-American music-making, open-instrumentation compositions have been as common as specified instrumentation compositions.

In the fourth step, having defined a set of parameters for music, we may now define a scale of levels of composer determinacy. I use this term instead of the more broad "indeterminacy." In an essay on Open Form compositions, Wolff traces the origin of the use of the word indeterminacy in composition to "early twentieth century scientific thinking" among other influences. He critiques the use of overly scientific, or depersonalized, accounts of the music-making process, including the conception and performance of open-form or indeterminate pieces. He says, "music ...imitates... human life in both its material... aspect and its history."⁹ Music is not a "natural" process. With very few exceptions, it is carried out deliberately by people, for people. The indeterminate repertoire's uniqueness lies in its attention to relationships between people, especially composer and performer, but also among performers. With this in mind, it seems useful to describe music, not in terms of a theoretical or abstract indeterminacy, but in terms of the amount of control the composer undertakes in each parameter. There are four basic levels of composer determinacy:

Composer Determinacy Levels:

Composer Determined

This is the traditional level of notated instructions. The composer clearly determines the outcome or action in a given parameter. The pitch parameter in most common practice classical music is Composer Determined, for example. Obviously absolute Composer Determinacy is not possible, but is somewhat of a conceptual approximation we accept.

8 1989a An Interview with Sun Ra. WKCR Program Guide, WKCR Radio, Columbia University, New York. January-February 1989. V(5): 3-8, 25-32.

9 "Open to Whom and to What," in *Christian Wolff: Cues--Writings and Conversations*, ed. G. Gronemeyer and R. Oehlschagel (Köln: Musiktexte, 1998), 176.

Composer Governed

The composer sets forth constraints that condition an outcome given specific types of data during a performance (or during the preparation of a performance).

Composer Suggested

The composer presents options to the performer with no (or minimal) rules as to what choices to make. A classic example of composer suggestion is the jazz lead sheet, which may be interpreted in many different ways. The notations in a lead sheet are somewhat passive and suggest, rather than mandate, sonic outcomes.

Composer Indetermined

The composer leaves decisions up to performers without rules or suggestions.

In many cases, the level may be subject to interpretation, and more than one level may be operative simultaneously.

In an optional fifth step, we identify whether the composer's contribution in the parameter being considered mandates or modifies an action, a result, or neither.

Mandate Class:

Action

Result

Neither

A simple way to demonstrate the first two classes would be to contrast two types of guitar notation: tablature and traditional notation. In tablature the guitarist is told behind which frets to stop the string, and thus a specific action. The pitch is not given. Tablature is thus in the Action mandate class. In conventional notation on the other hand, notes are given, but the guitarist may choose how to finger those notes and there will most often be more than one way to play them. Conventional notation in this case is in the result mandate class. This can be an important and interesting consideration in much indeterminate repertoire. Result is by far the most common so I will generally not comment on a Result mandate class.

Sixth step, having defined the level of composer determinacy of a parameter within a given chunk of music, we may wish to describe who or what (if the level is governed, suggested, or indetermined), besides the composer, decides the outcome, i.e., the "agent" of determination (in addition to the composer). A list of possible agents may also vary from composition to composition, but the following seems to be fairly useful:

Agents:

Tradition (performance practice)

Performer Preparation

Reaction – performer makes determination by interpreting real time data according to rules provided by composer (or tradition, or preparation)

Data sources: **Other performers**

Non-performer sources (audience, environment)

Chance procedures – actions initiated by performer to obtain data

Improvisation (spontaneous decision by performer)

Using this vocabulary, I will examine three pieces by Christian Wolff that provide a cross section of his indeterminate music, as well as a variety of indeterminate strategies.

Wolff described *For Five or Ten Players* (1962) as “my first attempt at writing for unspecified instruments in variable numbers...where performing tasks are specified... and situations (for example coordinations which depend on what is heard from other players, resulting in unpredictable durations).”¹⁰ *Edges* of 1968 is a highly conceptual and Wolff’s most freely interpretable piece, dating from his sojourn in England with Cornelius Cardew. *Exercises 1-16* is his most often performed “open clef heterophony” piece. Each piece reflects a zeitgeist. *For 5 or 10* is a thoroughly modernist work. It is from a group of compositions that, according to Wolff, use indeterminate procedures, not to give performers freedom, but to obtain sound results not possible through other means. In *Edges*, we have a transitional work between modernism and postmodernism. We imagine it coming out of a milieu of rampant free improvisation, in which the score takes a virtual fabric of improvised activity and suggests ways of revising its texture, leaving only its borders. It is a metatext, an overlay of one score on top of another that anticipates postmodernity. We still have the idea of space, openness, and sounds being themselves, however, that characterized Wolff’s earlier pointillist/modernist pieces. The postmodern *Exercises* are part of a radical shift in Wolff’s corpus, beginning with *Tilbury 1* (1969), away from pointillism, to an acceptance of abundant sequences of notes. *Exercises* suggests that, having ploughed the field through modernism, one begins to use discarded objects and aggregations since they have lost their earlier connotations. Or, having failed, in the face of the information age, to remove the detritus, one accepts it, including the anarchy of memory that all auditors carry. The *Exercises* are, in some ways, the most challenging of the three. Their instructions leave a great deal open, most especially the responsibility to create music out of the given materials. *For 5 or 10* is like a magic formula that, if followed strictly (as possible) and conscientiously, can’t help but produce interesting music, more specifically the kind of pointillist music that Wolff earlier produced by different means. *Edges* is open enough to allow a great number of possibilities, yet conceptual enough to provide guidance. The *Exercises* provide neither the comfort of interaction rules, nor the openness of material to allow one to fall back on free improvisation licks. All three compositions question, in different ways, what a musical composition is.

For 5 or 10 Players (1962)¹¹

For 5 or 10 is the precursor to *For 1, 2, or 3 People*, but uses essentially the same ground rules. The piece may be played by any five or ten performers. If ten, each performer gets one score page. If five, the ensemble may choose to give each performer either one or two score pages. In addition to the score pages there are also four pages of instructions which are essential to the performance of the piece. Each score page consists of a series of notational complexes, or “neumes” that indicate, within and directly below an open-bottom box, material, and, below that, the order and duration of that material. The resulting sound event is most elegantly classified as a *clang*, a term used by James

10 *Cues*, 490.

11 Score excerpt: Appendix A.

Tenney to describe a “sound or sound-configuration that is more or less immediately perceptible as an aural gestalt.”¹² These clangs are neither single “notes” nor phrases, but they hang together in a unit, notwithstanding they may contain several pitches or timbres. The “material” modifiers prescribe attributes of the clangs themselves, including number of pitches, number of timbres, dynamics, a gamut from which pitches are chosen, and relative legato between pitches and/or timbres. The attack and release time of clangs are indicated by coordination lines that are cued by attack and release points of sounds (typically the “next sound”) heard by the individual performer. Performers proceed freely from neume to neume in any order, using whatever sounds are present at a given moment to guide attacks and releases. Except that at some point during the performance, at the beginning, middle or end, performers, on cue, must play the neumes of their page from left to right, as, in jazz parlance, a sort of “head.” I have provided a more complete summation of the score as a whole, as well as specific interpretations of each neume of the first score page in Appendix D, with page one itself in Appendix A. Page one contains a total of nine neumes. Here is an examination of the first (left-most) neume:

Rhythm

Attack and release: The brace bracket indicates two options. In this case, the clang can either be performed as fast as possible, without coordination with other sounds, or it may be attacked two seconds after the release of the next sound heard. The release of this clang is open. If the performer chooses the bottom temporal option (coordination line with “2:0” in the middle), the order of this clang will be composer governed with reaction agent and collaborating performer as data source. The duration of the clang will be composer indetermined with improvisation agent.

i.e., OGARO and DIRI

Material

The number 4 indicates four timbres, to be connected smoothly as indicated by the slur. These must be performed over one pitch, since there is no pitch number (i.e., number in a box) given. There are two options for dynamics: mp or diminuendo. Timbre, pitch, intensity. Timbre is composer governed, since a number of timbres is given, but the timbres themselves are not specified. The agent of determination is improvisation. Pitch is also governed, since the neume requires one and only one pitch during the clang, but that pitch is left up to the performer. The agent is improvisation. Intensity is composer governed, since the neume gives two options, one of which must be chosen by the performer. The agent is improvisation.

i.e., TGRI, PGRI, VGRI

For 5 or 10 Players, as a whole, may be analyzed as follows:

Context

LIRT, LIRP (Spatial Locus)

The Spatial Location is composer indetermined. The score does not specify a place to perform the piece. The location of a performance will most likely be determined by performance practice, which will suggest a chamber music type venue (i.e., a relatively smaller recital hall, or performance space)

12 James Tenney, *META+HODOS and META Meta+Hodos* (Hanover, NH: Frog Peak Music, 1986), 24.

and preparation or decision made by performers in advance.

TIRT, TIRP, TIRRO/TIRRN (Temporal Locus)

The Temporal Locus is also Composer Indetermined and will most likely be determined by Performance Practice to be during the course of a concert scheduled at a traditional time, depending on region (say, 8 pm in the eastern U.S., 7 pm in the west), most likely on a non-holiday weekend night. I have included Reaction to data from Collaborating Performers and Non-performer Sources, since a performing ensemble may decide to change the placement of the piece in a program during the course of a concert based on input (i.e., “vibes”) from these sources.

FGRP (Participants)

The participants (performers and audience) are governed by the composer, in that he specifies two choices as to the number of performers, but does not determine who they are. The governing agent is performer preparation, since the performers will be chosen in advance.

IGAP, IGAI (Instrumentation)

Instrumentation is composer governed since he indicates constraints on which types of instruments should not be used (i.e., instruments with limited timbres) and what types of instrumental doublings are allowed. He does not specify instrumentation other than this. Instrumentation will be determined by performer preparation, except in the case of instrumental doublings, where an individual may switch between instruments, in which case the agent will be improvisation.

Material

TGAI, TGAARO (Timbre)

Timbre, on the whole, is governed, in that most neumes specify a number of timbres, while leaving the choice of timbres themselves open. Agents are improvisation for the most part, except that there are a few notations that suggest timbre choices in response to other sounds, in which case the agent would be reaction to collaborating performers.

PGRl, PGRRO (Pitch)

In many if not most events, the performer is given a number which tells how many pitches must be included during said event. Moreover, a slur above such a number indicates legato between these pitches. The absence of a number mandates the use of only one pitch and an “x” indicates the use of any number of pitches. Other notations govern pitch choice such as gamuts of pitch on open clef staves, from which the performer must choose. Because durations of many events are determined by sounds from other performers, or, potentially audience or environment, it is possible that an event may be forced to end before completion, i.e., before all pitches happen. Pitch is thus governed by notations and rules in the score. The agent will mostly be improvisation, except when events are cut off before completion, in which case another agent is reaction to data from other performers, or, less commonly, non-performer sources.

VGAI (Intensity)

Volume is composer governed on the whole, since some neumes include discrete choices of dynamics from which the performer must choose. Individual neumes not containing dynamics are composer indeterminated, however. Improvisation is the agent. A few events include indications to do something as opposite as possible to an adjacent event, in which case volume will be the most obvious and thus common choice, in which case reaction to sounds from colleague performers (or other sounds) would be the agent.

The order of events is governed on several levels and, perhaps indeterminated on others.

OGAP, OGAI (Order: macro)

The entire form of the piece is governed, in that a “head” must occur, but its placement is left open. The agent for the overall form is performer preparation, or improvisation (on the part of a director who cues the “head”).

OIAI (Order: page)

The order of individual neumes on a page, except for the “head”, is composer indeterminated, except that some neumes may only be played once.

OIAI (Order: neume)

Order of events within neumes is mostly composer indeterminated, since the pitch, timbre, and volume modifiers do not indicate order.

OGARO (Order: clang sequences)

However, the order of whole clangs is composer governed, since their attacks and releases are often cued by reaction to sounds from collaborating performers.

DGARO (Duration)

Earlier I talked about the way Wolff challenges “pieceness” in compositions like *For 5 or 10*. The way that events are started and ended in coordination with other events is, to my mind, what gives *For 5 or 10* its identity, much as melody, harmony or form might give a more conventional piece its identity. Similar to attack points, cutoff points of many events are determined by the players’ perception of attack and release points of other sounds, mostly from colleague performers, but also, potentially from audience or environment.

DIRI – The duration of a full performance of *For 5 or 10* is composer indeterminate according to the instructions. This duration will most likely be determined by improvisation, but may also be determined by advance preparation by use of a stopwatch.

Edges (1968)¹³

Context

LSAI – Spatial locus is, to my mind composer suggested. Wolff’s instructions are mostly about motion and placement in space. One assumes that he is using a spatial metaphor to describe “motion” among different types of more conventional musical material, but the instruction could easily and productively be construed to be more literal.

BIRP – Temporal locus is left open in this score and will, in most performances, be determined by advance preparation.

FIRP – The score does not specify particular participants, performers or audience.

IIRP – This is even more radically open-instrumentation than *For 5 or 10*, in that it is for any number of players of any instruments (or possibly people engaged in other kinds of activity).

Material

Wolff’s handling of “material” in this piece is layered. As with most indeterminate pieces, he provides both a score to be looked at during a performance, and a page of instructions to be used in preparing and rehearsing a performance. The score is a single page of notational signs, some familiar, some evocative/intuitive, and some ambiguous, in a somewhat sparse non-linear graphical presentation. The instructions consist of a page with two overlapping boxes, the larger of which contains definitions of each sign. This legend is also somewhat non-linear in its appearance. What is interesting, even funny, is that each sign thus defined appears only once on the score, begging the question as to why use signs at all, especially when most performers will pencil in the meanings of each sign as a first step in preparing the piece, and when some of the definitions are themselves ambiguous/poetic/open to creative interpretation. With the aid of the legend, most of the signs can be interpreted fairly easily by any improvising musician. But the other box, the verbal instructions, puts a complex, thought provoking and humorous overlay on the score, which will likely affect choices of material, order and duration. The essence of these instructions (and the title) are to play around the edges or boundaries of the score, not directly “on” the score. When rehearsing this piece with students, I usually begin by learning to play “on” the score, i.e., in a more conventional manner, moving from sign to sign at will, while doing all the things that good collaborative improvisers do, listening, responding, balancing, etc. After mastering this, we move on to the meta level that the instructions suggest, using the experience of the initial “wrong” versions as a surface to play against.

TSRI – Timbre is composer suggested in that many of the notations suggest a timbral interpretation, some of them exclusively, as in “filtered.” The choices will most likely be determined by individual improvisation, since choice and interpretation of signs will be so varied.

PSRI – Pitch is composer suggested in that many of the notations suggest pitch choice, some of them almost exclusively, as in “high, very high.” The choices will most likely be determined by individual improvisation, since choice and interpretation of signs will be so varied.

13 Score excerpt: Appendix B.

VSRI - Volume is composer suggested in that many of the notations suggest dynamics, one of them, “becoming louder, becoming audible,” exclusively. The choices will most likely be determined by individual improvisation, since choice and interpretation of signs will be so varied.

Rhythm

OSAI – Ordering of events in this piece is suggested, albeit obliquely and poetically, by the instructions, which gingerly describe possible routes of motion, presumably between types of material, while carefully disclaiming any constraint implicit in the suggested possibilities. Wolff also allows for literal use of any sign, but only once in a performance per sign.

OSARO – In addition to performing in and around the signs, Wolff allows for use of a sign as a trigger for something else, i.e., when you hear another person play that sign, move to a new territory. Thus the choice of activity will be determined partially by reaction to other performers.

DIRI – Duration could be interpreted similarly to order (OSAI), i.e., that Wolff’s space and motion metaphor could have reference to duration of events and clusters of events in addition to order of events. But the score leans more toward suggesting a type of motion, while leaving duration of activity very open. Thus I would say duration is mostly composer indetermined with the agent of determination being improvisation.

DSARO – In addition to performing in and around the signs, Wolff allows for use of a sign as a trigger for something else, i.e., when you hear another person play that sign, move to a new territory. Thus the duration of activity will be determined partially by reaction to other performers.

Exercises (1974)¹⁴

Wolff has said that the *Exercises* and other “heterophonic unison” compositions were composed partially in response to hearing performances of minimalist compositions in the early ‘70s. *Exercises* consists of 14 pieces, each of which has the following properties (in addition to some movement specific ones):

- Exercises* may be performed by any number of any instruments or voices.
- Staves are “open-clef”: players may use any clef or transposition, but there may be a maximum of two simultaneous pitch interpretations at any given moment.
- White notes are any duration. Black notes 1-1/4 seconds or shorter. Single beams indicate legato (rather than eighth notes). Double beams (sixteenth notes) indicate very fast notes.
- Wedges indicate a rest of any duration.
- “Heterophonic unison”: players may be anywhere from strict unison to out of sync but in the same ballpark. (In rehearsals I’ve participated in with Wolff of *Exercises*, he has said that if players are on different staff systems, they are probably too far apart.) Tempo changes may be initiated by any player, but must be abandoned if a majority of the ensemble does not join in.

Context

LIRP – As with most compositions, spatial locus is composer indetermined, and its result is determined by performer preparation.

14 Score excerpt: Appendix C.

BIRP – Temporal locus is also composer indetermined and its result is determined by performer preparation.

FSRP/ISRP – The number and choice of people and instruments is left open, but a few aspects of the score suggest that action in this realm is composer suggested rather than indetermined. Wolff says in the instructions that “[a]rrangements for each exercise to be played should be considered, e.g. who, how many, play, who plays what parts, etc.” In other words, in performances of one or more exercises by more than one performer, performers should carefully assign different exercises and different portions of them to different subsets of the ensemble. He also suggests, however, that these determinations may also change during the course of a performance, suggesting the agent of improvisation rather than preparation. In #2 and #14, parts for optional unpitched percussion are provided. Percussionist plays (six instruments ordered by resonance) in heterophonic unison with pitched instruments, but is given numbers from 1-6 in lieu of notes. This is another example of a composer suggested instrumentation whose result is determined by advance preparation.

Material

TIRI/TIRP – Timbre is composer indetermined in that Wolff says that “color, and modes of playing are all flexible.” Its result will be determined by improvisation or preparation.

TGRP – One exception to the above: in the unpitched percussion parts to #2 and #14, discussed above, inasmuch as “resonance” is a function of timbre, the score governs how to map these percussion timbres to the numbers 1-6 used in the score.

PGRP/PGRI – Pitch is notated almost conventionally, except for the open clef convention and the rules that govern it. Pitch is therefore composer governed via the instruction that notes on open clef staves may potentially have several interpretations (treble, bass, or other clefs, and transpositions utilized by transposing instruments such as clarinet). Also, Wolff does not allow octave transpositions (except in #14). Pitches that cannot be produced must be skipped. Pitch choice will thus be determined in many performances by which subset of the ensemble is playing at a particular moment. i.e., if the ensemble contains instruments that normally play with more than two different clef/transposition combinations, tutti passages are not possible—only two of these combinations may play at the same time. So the agent will be either preparation (when arrangements of movements or passages are made in advance) or improvisation (when instruments enter or exit according to the prescribed rules).

VIRI – Volume is indetermined in that there are no indication of dynamics except that the instructions state that “articulation, [and] amplitude... are... flexible.”

VDR – The exception is #14 in which the dynamics p and f are provided for most attacks in the percussion part.

Rhythm

ODA – Ordering of notes in individual parts is determined by the score.

OGAI/OGARO – In a texture involving more than one player, the occurrence of notes between players is governed by the instructions relating to heterophonic unison. It is determined by improvisation, but also by reaction to other players, since Wolff states that changes in speed may

not be sustained unless a majority of the ensemble accepts them.

DGRI/DGRRO – Duration of notes is governed by the range of durations prescribed for each type of note (and varies somewhat from exercise to exercise). The agents are improvisation and reaction to other performers, similar to OGAI/OGARO above.

For comparison, the results are lined up below:

	For 5 or 10 Players	Edges	Exercise 9
Context	LIRP	LSAI	LIRP
	BIRP	BIRP	BIRP
	FIAP	FIRP	FSRP
	IGNP	IIRP	ISRP
Material	TGRI	TSRI	TIRI/TIRP
	PGRI	PSRI	PGRP/PGRI
	VGRI	VSRI	VIRI/VDR
Rhythm	OIAI/ODA/OGARO	OSAI/OSARO	ODA/OGAI/OGARO
	DGARO	DSARO	DGRI/DGRRO

This spreadsheet makes possible a few observations:

-There is very little composer suggestion in *For 5 or 10*. There is plenty of composer suggestion in *Edges* and *Exercises*.

-There is very little composer determination in any of these pieces.

-The context details are the most composer determined in *For 5 or 10*, and least determined in *Edges*.

-In a seeming irony, material is least determined in *Exercises*, and most determined in *For 5 or 10*.

-Rhythm is least determined in *Edges*, and equally determined between *For 5 or 10* and *Exercises*, though there is more flexibility of coordination in *Exercises*, but more flexibility in order of events in *For 5 or 10*.

The spreadsheet also suggests a picture of performer experiences:

For 5 or 10

Performers devotedly perform tasks that create magic. They depersonalize and create sound complexes, doing as much listening as playing. There is little engagement of individual will/taste/subjectivity. There are clear-cut criteria for success.

Edges

Performers *imprevis* (improvise/revise). The score is extremely conceptual with no specific tasks

to perform. Performers freely use or refer to a vocabulary of sound classifications. There are somewhat confusing and contradictory/ambiguous criteria for success.

Exercises

Performers do a revised version of a familiar task, reading notes on a page. They transgress the notational conventions and make decisions based on multiple processes: read notes, listen and interact. There is very little guidance conceptually, so there no fixed criteria for success, except traditional textural ones that will most likely be grafted in to any performance.

It also evokes a picture of the listening experience:

For 5 or 10

Pointillism is the experienced texture. Interestingly, this will vary quite pronouncedly between the 5 player and 10 player versions. There is a certain magic in the effect of sounds emerging out of one another. Silence is an equal partner with sound, especially in the 5 player version.

Edges

The listening experience varies greatly. There will likely be little awareness of individual sound events. This piece will be more cathartic and subjective.

Exercises

The overall characteristics are strange, dense, witty. One hears many notes and much activity with very little silence. One experiences the self-referentiality and composedness of heterophony, canon, and mixed parallel 6ths (when treble and bass clef are combined). There is a strange polymodality in the combination of different clefs/transpositions, without a sense of voice stratification (bass, soprano, etc.) as a result of the extreme parallel/heterophonic motion.

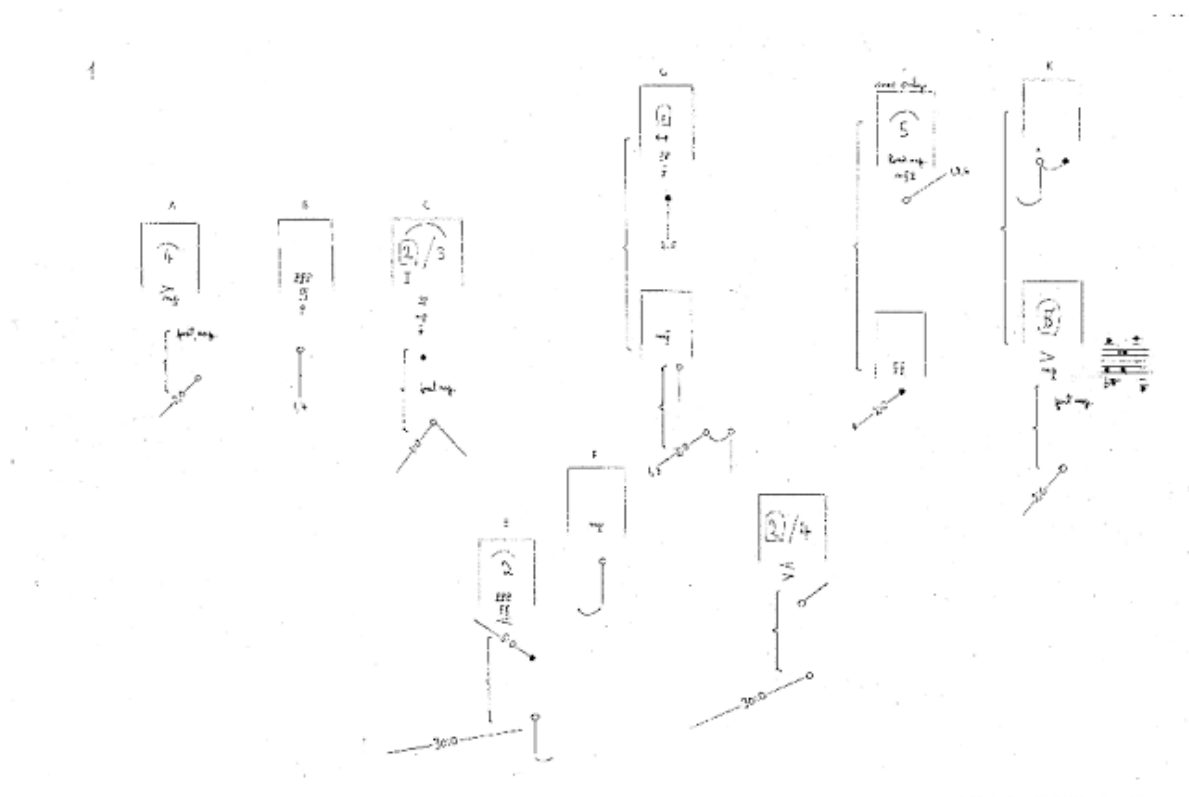
Conclusion

I have lived with and performed the open-instrumentation works of Wolff for many years, at least since being introduced to *For 1, 2, or 3 People* in a performance workshop led by Chris Brown at Mills College in 1990. The initial experience was troubling, disillusioning, gratifying, and transformative all at once. I spent many hours studying a single page of this score, even woodshedding its inscrutable yet evocative notations, trying to interpret their sonic meaning, while also trying to prepare myself for their infinite performative possibilities. I suppose what I came away with was a deeper awareness of the nature and illusion of time, as well as the indeterminacy, and, thus, beauty and variety of the universe and of human volition. I have since taught and directed these pieces in student ensembles and have found them to be profound teaching tools (particularly for students who “want to change their thinking”), inasmuch as they foster deep listening, collective decision-making, and a focus on activity over ego. Students come away from the experience much better musicians and thinkers.

This music, like other indeterminate repertoire, resists traditional styles of analysis which depend mostly on the two dimensional pitch/time, or, to be more general, sound/time axis to create a metanarrative. In open form pieces, such as *For 5 or 10 Players* and *Edges*, there is no determinate

sequence or duration of events to make a sound/time analysis possible. *Exercises* poses the problem that there is a prescribed sequence of events, but the open clef, heterophonic unison pitch materials are hard to pin down sufficiently to analyze them. Examining what an indeterminate score does determine on its own terms may uncover subtleties and properties in unexpected regions of thought, activity and interaction. As with all analysis (of things that are compelling enough to provoke it) and, indeed, inquiry, this may lead, not to demystification, but to reveal more deeply the ways in which these compositions, or improvisations are mysterious and therefore useful.

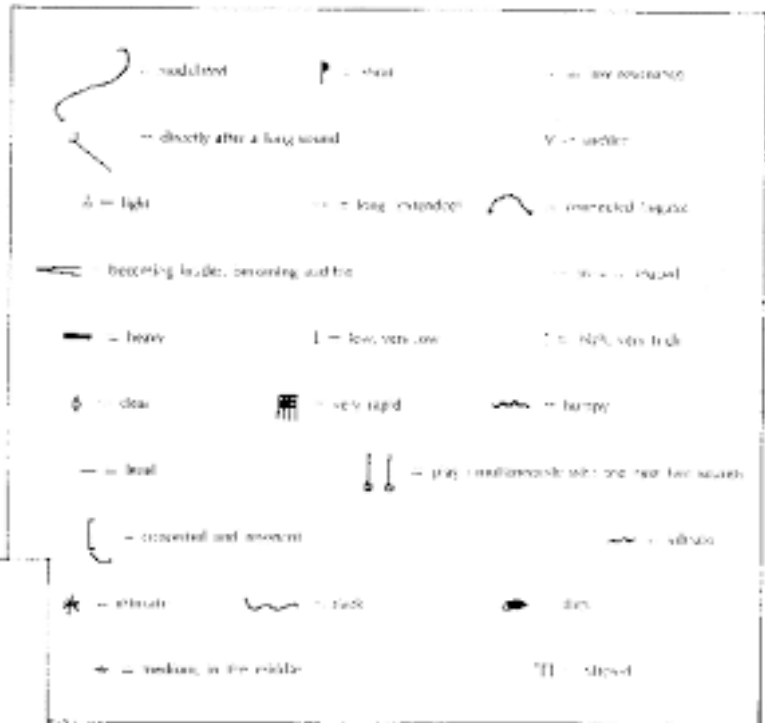
Appendix A: For 5 or 10 Players, Page 1 with events lettered



Appendix B: *Edges*, Instructions

Each player should have a bag of the signs. There can be any number of players.

The signs on the score are not primarily what a player plays. They mark out a score of traces, indicating points, surfaces, notes or times. A player should play in relation to, at, and around the space thus partly marked out. He can move about in it randomly, beg, in a sentence, or jumping from one point to another, but does not always have to be moving, nor does he have to go everywhere. Insofar as the signs are limits, they can be reached but should not be explored. The way to a limit need not be continuous, in a straight line. The limits, or points, can be taken at different distances—for example, far away, like a horizon, or close, like a tree with branches overhead. But decide where at any given moment you are. You can also use the signs as cues: wait till you notice one and then respond. Or you can simply play a sign as it is, but only once in a performance.



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Appendix C: *Exercises*, Exercise 1, page 1

f



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Appendix D: A More Detailed Description of *For 5 or 10 Players*

- If 5 players: Each member of ensemble is given one page from 1-5 *or* from 6-10, *or* both, i.e., player 1: 1+6, player 2: 2+7, etc.
- If 10 players: Each member of ensemble gets one page (from 1-10).
- 7 and 8 are together on one page. Two copies of this page are included in the score. There are coordinations that go explicitly between 7 and 8.
- Performance may be of any duration. Most of the time, players may go freely between any event to any other (“events” are distinguished by a bottomless box above the notations for that event). During some point in the performance, however, the ensemble should, on cue from someone, play the events on their page in order from left to right.
- Each event may consist of a determined, governed, or indetermined number of pitches and/or timbres. The pitches and dynamics may be determined or governed. The start and end of the event may also be governed by coordinations with other sounds.
- Brace brackets to the left of events indicate two choices that may be taken. There may also be a nested brace bracket within a brace bracket.

Events tend to consist of two parts:

1. Event material (how many and what kind of sounds)
2. Coordination (when to begin and when to end)

The event material is usually above the coordination-neume (lines usually with circles at one end) within the event box.

On page 1 (Appendix A), I have labeled events A-I. Following are interpretations of each event.

A

-4 with slur above: Event should contain four timbres that proceed more or less smoothly from one to another. No number in box, therefore, only one pitch.

-Dim. sign above mp: Event should be performed either with a diminuendo, or at the steady dynamic of mp, or the two may be combined.

-Brace bracket: choose one of the two options:

fast asp.: perform the 5 timbres as fast as possible. Event does not need to be coordinated with any other sounds.

-White notehead with “2:0” in its stem: white notehead represents the event. Begin event 2 seconds after the end of the next sound heard.

B

-No numbers given, therefore, one pitch and one timbre.

-ppp/ff/p: choose one or more of these dynamics for the event.

-White notehead with stem and numbers under: normally this coordination means to begin the event as simultaneously as possible with the beginning of the next sound heard, and to end event with the end of that same sound. Performer must also choose one of the two numbers below. If “1” then coordinate with the first sound heard. If “4” then coordinate with the fourth sound. If 4 is chosen, it is not clear from the instructions whether the beginning and end of event are with the fourth sound heard, or if the beginning coordinates with the next sound heard, and the end is coordinated with the fourth sound heard. In such cases, the performer may choose.

C

-Boxed 2 / 3 with slur above: Boxed 2: event contains two pitches. 3: three timbres. The timbres and pitches can be combined in any way. The slur indicates smooth motion between successive

pitches and timbres.

- Upper case I symbol: Pitch changes must be effected by some means other than fingering.
- Dynamics: choose one or more of the dynamics.
- Brace bracket: One of the very unusual cases in which there are three options to choose from.
- Black notehead: Event can be played at any time. Event should be a second or less in duration.
- fast asp.: Event should be performed as fast as possible, but coordination is indeterminated.
- White notehead with two stems: Event begins one second after the next sound heard ends. Event ends when next sound begins.

D

- 2: Two timbres. Smooth connection between. Only one pitch.
- Dynamics: choose and/or combine.
- Brace bracket gives two coordination options:
- Black notehead with 5:0 in the middle of stem: Begin event 5 seconds after next sound ends. Event must be a second or less in duration.
- White notehead with 30:0 and slur attached to stem: Event begins 30 seconds after end of next sound. End event before end of next sound.

E

- No numbers: one pitch and one timbre
- mp: Event should be mp
- White notehead with stem and slur: Event begins after next sound has begun and ends simultaneously with end of that sound.

F

- Two different events are possible, as indicated by the large brace bracket
- Upper event:
 - x in box: Any number of pitches.
 - "I-beam": "produce changes of pitch by a change in fingering while maintaining a continuous action."
 - dynamics: choose one or more.
 - Black notehead: Black notehead indicates event should last one second or less, however, the stem indicates to coordinate beginning and end of event with the beginning and end of either the second, or fifth sound heard.
- Lower event:
 - mf: event must be mf.
 - Brace bracket: choose one of the two coordinations.
 - Upper coordination: beginning and end of event should coordinate with beginning and end of next sound heard.
 - Lower coordination: Begin event 2 seconds after the end of the first *or* third sound heard.
 - End with the end of the next sound heard.

G

- Boxed 2: Event contains two pitches.
- Unboxed 4: Event contains four timbres.
- Cresc. and dim: Event contains either cresc., dim., or both.
- Brace bracket indicates choice of two coordinations:
 - Upper coordination: Event begins any time, but ends with beginning of next sound heard.
 - Lower coordination: Event begins 30 seconds after end of next sound heard.

H

-Brace bracket: Choice of two completely distinct events.

-Upper event:

“Once only”: this event may be performed only once during performance.

5 with slur above: 5 timbres, one pitch, smooth connection of timbres.

“loud asp.,” “mf” “p”: event should use one or more of these dynamics.

Coordination: Event starts any time, ends with beginning of either the first, third, or sixth sound heard.

-Lower event:

No large numbers, therefore one pitch and one timbre.

ff: event is ff.

Coordination: Black notehead indicates event is one second or less. Event begins 2 seconds after the end of the 4th sound heard.

I

-Brace bracket: Choice of two completely distinct events.

-Upper event:

No big numbers: One pitch and one timbre.

Coordination: Begin event after start of next sound, end event one second or less after end of that sound.

“x” above notehead: “play that note as far away from the last sound heard as possible in every respect possible (e.g., pitch, loudness, timbre).”

-Lower event:

Boxed 5: 5 pitches, one timbre.

Line through 5: “some aspect of the tones (duration, loudness, pitch, etc.) should be different, and, should one come to play that event again, it must be played differently in some respect.”

Dim. and mp: Choose one or both dynamics for event.

Staff with black noteheads: Pitches must be selected from those given, using any clef.

Brace bracket: choose either “fast as possible” or the coordination below.

Coordination: Begin event 2 seconds after end of next sound heard.

the wulf.

shattered glances at the death of Harris Wulfson and the life of a community

(text by Corel Fogel, Lukas Kendall, Liz Kotz, Stuart Krimko, Joseph Kudirka, James Orsher, Mark So, and Michael Winter; compiled and edited by Mark So)

The mood at the wulf. was half warm, and half stark. There were several familiar faces who have defined the wulf. community in recent years, several missing, and several new. In the audience were just over 20 persons. Of the 257 invitees in Saturday's email, 9 attended.

...

I never thought of the wulf. as being or even becoming something in the beginning. My more politically-minded thoughts had yet to form. There was simply (what seemed to me) a special group of people that found a way to start something. If anything, it might have been luck. We had time, ideas, and each other.

...

In Los Angeles, unlike in New York, the approaches developed in 1960s avant-garde music have left virtually no traces in the arts scene. Now a gradual shift seems underway. That, at least, is the impression one gets from the programming at the non-commercial exhibition space the wulf., where filmmaker Madison Brookshire and composer Tashi Wada recently presented *Passage* (2012), "an installation in color and sound for two 16mm projectors" in which the central issues of minimal music were brought up for renewed debate: the dissolution of beholder and space, of structure and work. It is a work in which an apparently simple structure – two approximately 13-minute films, played continuously – creates a series of complex effects.

Passage came out of a series of collaborations between the two artists, mostly involving Wada playing music with one of Brookshire's earlier *Color Series* films. But unlike these earlier screenings/performances, *Passage* was designed as an ongoing piece – allowing viewers to enter at any point – and as a fused structure. At the wulf., a nonprofit performance space in downtown L.A., the event went on for more than five hours, with many viewers staying for a good part of that. Modest in scale and technology, the work invites an intimate viewing; it's a form and an experience that has developed organically over several years' work. Wada and Brookshire are among of group of younger composers and artists loosely affiliated with the wulf.; most graduated from Cal Arts several years ago, having worked with teachers like James Benning, Michael Pisaro and the late James Tenney. While indebted to what composer Robert Ashley described as the "non-timeline music" of La Monte Young et al, their work could be seen as exploring an experience of time that is derived from a process of perception rather than an

apparent stasis.

...

So the concert went okay. There were a few conceptual challenges, and a couple of technical ones.

I had loaned my snare drum to a friend who was to return it to me at the concert. However, he never arrived! I had already mentally prepared not to have a functional snare drum, as I was needing to put some parts back together, which by the time of the gig were unlocatable, as you can likely imagine. Specifically, the metal wires that give the snare that distinct and familiar snap, crackle, and pop were missing, which meant it would only have what was often referred to as a 'tenor drum', or a relatively higher tom-tom-like sound. However, and funnily enough, I now remember why that friend originally needed a snare drum, and that those wires were already intact, and only a top drumhead was missing from the equation.

So speaking of equations, basically the hassle of locating and affixing the unlocatable parts was non-existent, but the loss of the snap, crackle, pop in my palette was that much more of a loss, because that snap, crack, pop would have been much more available, mechanically, had the friend shown up and returned the snare drum. I did have one smaller, lower tom-like drum which took the snare's place in my set-up. I think it worked okay. Otherwise, the height and the location of the vibraphone was challenging, and some pieces of foam flew about as I was trying to use them.

...

Harris died the week Eric [Clark] and I were to move into 1026 S. Santa Fe Ave. We delayed moving in to attend the funeral in New York City with Cat [Lamb] and James [Orsher]. I remember standing next to Cat witnessing Harris's father become overwhelmed with grief. Perhaps I had never seen someone so visibly upset. After the funeral, we drove to the Poconos for an intimate remembrance/celebration of Harris's life. If I remember correctly, it was during that drive that we collectively agreed on a name: the wulf.

...

I'm not sure what to say... There are a million things I could say about Harris, and not much I could say about the wulf. – I haven't been there in many years, though it's still this presence in my life. I think that's something that the two have in common – they're things that are very important to me and my life, but not things I have any direct involvement with. I mean, Harris will be a massive presence in my life until I die, and the wulf. is now/still there, but thousands of miles away, and I'm connected to it through friends and music, but only indirectly.

One thing I've often thought about Harris is just how many people must have felt more-or-less the same about him as I did. I mean, I don't know if I could say he was my best friend, because there must be ten (or many, many more) people who would have thought Harris was their best

friend. He was so many things to so many people. If he wasn't my best friend, he was definitely as good a friend as I could ever hope to have. I remember driving across L.A. to see multiple gigs (and girls; which was more important a motivation, I don't know) in the same night; playing Velvet Underground songs with him in the atrium at Cal Arts; getting drunk at his house and listening to John Hartford records; hanging out on a hot summer day and watching hours of *Shoa*; going to the coffee shop at the mall... just loads and loads of the different kind of things that you do with friends.

...

The windows are East-facing and opaque. The color gradients in the morning here are spectacular.

...

To me, the performance had a slightly unnatural start, and overall felt a little bit forced. But that's like all part of the process right? As a few of you may know, I prefer to space out my solo performances due to fear of repeating myself. I had played Saturday night at a house party/concert. The vibe was so familiar and bizarre, because it was comprised of current and recently graduated Cal Arts students, all roughly 8-12 years younger than me. It was like time-traveling to 2002. I was overcome with nervous energy and thought, which made for an explosive performance, but left me feeling a little dry for last night's [at the wulf.]. While it was a concert, the experience was disconcerting.

The other performances were wonderful. Andrew Young's piece was a startling nine minutes. It was an interesting and challenging duration for an expansive drone piece; borderline deceptive! Caracol Carnívoro delivered a truly refreshing and exhilarating performance from start to finish.

...

If I'm honest with myself, the wulf. has always been a source of ambivalence.

...

Passage is produced using looping technology that allows two looped 16mm films projected onto a single surface (a white painted wall, not a screen). Each film is a gradually changing color field, produced without a camera, using film lab technology. Superimposed, the two projections largely cancel each other out, producing a glowing rectangle, with more vividly colored borders at the edges where the two films don't fully overlap. The soundtrack consists of both sides of Wada's 2010 LP *Alignment* (presenting the direct and retrograde movements of an eight-violin canon on opposite sides of the record) played at the same time. Both sound and image consist of overlapping recto and verso versions of the same materials, but of course, what happens when they intersect is very different. Light is subtractive; the two colored films nearly cancel each other out, hollowing out the central field. Sound is additive, such that the two soundtracks generate a swelling sonic arc that reverberates through the room. Based on where one stood, of

course, the sound “mix” would change, and audience members were invited to move throughout the space. Anyone passing in front of a projector would generate vividly colored shadows on the wall, since by blocking one light source, the other would be more fully revealed.

The work's focused structure can be understood more clearly in comparison with an earlier evening of projected images and sound/music presented at the wulf. by filmmaker Rick Bahto and composer Mark So, *Still Lifes, Donuts, Twice Around, Palms* (2011). For more than four hours, Bahto used two 35mm slide projectors to cast two series of images – of Los Angeles area donut shops and cacti – onto walls, floors and ceiling, in constantly varying rhythms and configurations, while So played a tape (*Twice Around*, comprising different field recordings) and performed his notebook, *a book of palms*, at the piano. With four tracks of (apparently unrelated) material being activated in different ways, the evening nonetheless created a compelling whole. Exemplifying different tendencies within the field, the Brookshire-Wada and Bahto-So collaborations manifest different pathways made available by post-Cagean compositional practice. While both components of "Passage" are, in effect, realizations of scores, generated in relation to a matrix, the components of the Bahto-So evening were generated from strictly unscored material contingencies. Yet these approaches are hardly opposed or mutually exclusive.

...

If it is unknown exactly when something happens, our hearing becomes much more acute. The gate seems to go down at a different time every night; a total mystery. By now, I always hear it.

...

I can't really recall the exact chronology at the start. Back when we were at Santa Barbara, Mike [Winter] and I had been talking about starting a performance space. And it was already clear that Mike would try to do it whether or not I was around. After that, I'm not sure if Mike (or was it Mike and Eric [Clark] together?) decided to name the venue "the wulf." after actually finding a feasible space, or if the name came before the physical location. Had I been directly involved in starting up the space, I don't think I would've agreed to the name.

From the outset I was uncomfortable with the name. I may or may not have talked with Mike about it – can't remember. The strangeness of the abbreviation. Or the strangeness of the memorialization. Was it a way of claiming Harris for our side? Harris' death tragically capped off a string of deaths that hangs over that time. Maybe because I saw him just a few days before... His death is still incredibly present for me; tears are welling up as I write this.

...

In the summer, at night, the temperature outside drops below the temperature inside. The mosquitoes enter for respite from the nightly winter and feast. I am always amazed how they find a way through my mosquito net.

...

While certain kinds of durational and experimental tropes are fashionable in the artworld of late, they are also fundamentally at odds with the market-driven and spectacle-driven logics that animate American museum and gallery contexts alike. Is it possible, in 2012, to continue to hold out hope for spheres of genuine artistic experimentation? Especially at a moment when performance, the ephemeral and the “noncommercial” are rapidly being codified as just another marketable novelty?

There is, of course, a gesture of refusal – of the market and its cavalcade of styles and products – which clears a lot of ground. But refusal alone is hardly what motivates compelling work, and these collaborations would have “felt right” 20 years ago, too. The fact that these events were happening while the Pacific Standard Time initiative was unfolding also bears noting. The four-hour Bahto-So collaboration occurred the same night as the big Getty opening – and I was glad to be sitting on the floor in some weird downtown loft rather than sipping champagne on the terrace.

...

I was Harris's roommate at Amherst College and I love the fact that the wulf. exists and honors him. I have always found it peculiar how we pass into history. Even if our legacy survives in something named after us, it's just a name and in time doesn't mean anything. I presume most people who attend the wulf. now did not know Harris; “the wulf.” is just a name and an abstraction. At Amherst, we lived in dorms named after, I presume, dead alumni, and thought little of referring to Pond or Milliken or wherever. They were no longer people, just places to drink. Harris would find this amusing.

...

Now, more than ever, especially after living at the wulf. for six years, I am hyperaware that our world is growing more and more conservative at an exponentially increasing rate. And of course, the underground gets institutionalized and follows suit. Trying to safeguard the wulf. from that is always on my mind though I know it is not something that one can actively protest and fight against. the wulf. was once strictly about music, but perhaps I am growing more accepting of what I think the wulf. has inadvertently become: an experiment in community and economy; a place where there is little distinction between art and life.

...

When word of Harris's death reached me in July 2008, I was traveling alone across south Texas. Oddly, this same sense of separation continues to define my relationship with the wulf. more than six years later.

I had hoped to reconnect with Harris once I got around to New York in another month. We were close, and not; what we lacked in social compatibility was made up for in what would be a

varied and stimulating run of shared music-making over several years. We got to know each other at Cal Arts, although in fact we'd randomly met years earlier through a mutual friend. Harris suffered a mental break in our last year of school, and helping him through it drew several of us closer to him. I would say we were still learning to be friends when he died. After the initial shock, I remember the feeling of relief at being nowhere near, with no feasible way of getting there in time for the after-death proceedings. Perhaps it was the spate of personal losses I'd just been through, that had left me feeling emptied out (and which I was very much in the process of fleeing). Or maybe it just struck me as too genuinely sad to repair or reconcile with acts of mourning. Like some primitive survival mechanism, I still can't fully invest emotionally in a space that is at least partly marked by his death.

...

Since 2008, the wulf. has been one of the pre-eminent venues for experimental music in Los Angeles. It's housed, along with its two founders and directors Eric KM Clark and Michael Winter, in a downtown loft, which means that attending performances is a close-knit affair: the audience sits on dining room chairs, or couches, or on the floor, and there's always a bottle of whiskey and bags of snacks on a table next to the bowl for cash donations. the wulf. is both a space and a community. All events are free, and performances feel like shared rituals rather than attempts at entertaining a crowd. As a result, artists can plan events that require flexibility, intimacy, or unusual conditions.

Such was the case with *this event will start during astronomical twilight* (2013), a recent performance of works by Winter and Mark So, another Los Angeles-based composer, scheduled to begin between 5:16 and 5:46 a.m. on a Sunday that also happened to be Easter. When I arrived shortly before 5:00, the assembled group was both beginning and ending its day; some had been awake all night, and others, like myself, had woken up early.

The score for Winter's *minor third abstract* is a single sentence: "with a very gradual, natural, and continuous shift of setting." The subject of the piece is the experience of steady change in the ambient environment, and the sounds made during its performance frame a transition over which the performer has no direct control.

...

Harris jumped in front of a train.

...

Shortly after 5:30 the lights in the room, already dim, were turned down further and Winter seated himself at the piano. The nocturnal purple and orange of the pre-dawn sky, mixed with the glow from the sodium streetlights, provided the backdrop through the industrial windows behind him. The performance began with several minutes of silence, as if to allow the darkness and stillness to sink in. Winter then began playing a single note toward the center of the piano,

often allowing for considerable duration of silence between striking the note again. After five minutes, one of these silent stretches allowed for a bunch of vociferous birds to contribute their morning song. I measured the changing light by the white of a page in my notebook. There were moments early on when I worried that I was writing over my own notes, but the sky, like the page on which I was writing, slowly began to turn white.

...

As the space started up, I mostly watched from afar. I was particularly impressed at Mike and Eric's tenacity at keeping the venue running and early on getting 501(c)3 status. Also, although having the wulf. double as a living space is probably what makes it semi-economically feasible, it adds to my strange feeling about the venue. Or maybe it was simply the lack of doors. I only stayed a few nights there.

...

In case of an earthquake, do not get under the piano.

...

But it continued and certainly gained a reputation and an existence. People in Berlin speak of the space quite normally like any other venue on the experimental music circuit. I wonder when the day will come when someone will ask me if I've ever heard of the venue "the wulf."

I haven't really been in L.A., or been very involved in the scene since roughly the time the wulf. was founded. For me, Harris's death (even though it happened in New York) still hangs over things there, since the wulf. became the focus (or one of the foci) of that collective activity.

...

After 40 minutes, So, who had been seated with the rest of the audience, approached a laptop computer placed in front of the piano and pressed a key to begin his own piece. Winter continued playing for another ten minutes, during which both compositions could be heard at the same time. Though he eventually stopped, there was no distinct pause between the two works, emphasizing that this was one event comprised of contributions from two composers; one piece simply turned into the other, like night into day.

...

Tashi used to prefer Wednesdays; starting at midnight.

...

So's composition, *though we haven't read it, we know there is a script*, makes use of "The End of New England," an essay by the poet Eileen Myles about class, language, poetry, and the American project. It is a 90-minute recording, originally made on a cassette tape, of So reading

the essay over and over again, starting and stopping the tape depending on nuances in the text. The performance of the piece was a playback of the tape, which So had transferred to the computer as two separate tracks. Both 45-minute sides of the cassette were heard simultaneously, one from the left speaker and one from the right. Phrases and fragments of language overlapped and overwrote one another. I thought again about trying to take notes in the dark, the ways in which this was like thinking, and how new thoughts obscure old ones by replacing them in the mind.

...

When we moved in, Lauren [Pratt] gave us a couch and a set of Badminton racquets. Our first shuttlecock was a tampon wrapped in low-adhesive blue tape.

...

I think if the wulf. is successful, it's successful as some sort of institutional analogue of friendship. In fact, I think that's the way the best venues/spaces/festivals work. To the people to whom they are important, they seem incredibly special, and the relationships seems irreplaceable. There are definitely places I feel this way about – for years, the closest thing I had to a girlfriend was a particular bar I nearly lived at. There are music festivals I've been involved with several times, where I feel like my relationship to that festival is somehow as good as it could be, on both ends. It's a sort of friendship, or really, it's a sort of love. I hope the wulf. can exist in this way for the people to whom it's important – to not just feel as if it were, but actually *be* irreplaceable.

Anyway, that's how both [Harris and the wulf.] exist for me – they're important to my life, but I can't say in one exact way just how. Of course I'd burn the wulf. down every day for the rest of my life if it meant that I could get 15 more minutes with Harris, just to have a cup of coffee, smoke a Nat Sherman, etc., but I can't have that. You've gotta take the rough with the smooth.

...

I am looking forward to overcoming my nostalgia of the beginning.

...

Several iterations of spring were cropping up: there was the spring that appeared in the essay, and another as So read it out loud on the tape, and the most tangible one that was taking place in real time, on an early Sunday morning at the end of March. Together, they emphasized that coincidence and heightened attention are dependent upon one another, and that in concert they can take hold of the senses and direct them to their own ends, revealing unexpected beauty, symmetry, and congruencies of form. This is the kind of awareness that arises when art is treated as an active agent of simile, a force intent on bringing disparate things into proximity. It's about more than the perfect mimesis of the obnoxious parrot. The whistling of the little brown bird—the wilder, unpredictable utterance—“[is] speech too.”

As the event drew toward its conclusion, the sun was visible for the first time as a pale, distinct orb through the wulf.'s tall industrial windows. On the one hand, it was just a sunrise, like any other. But any sunrise is also a special event, at once completely arbitrary and indicative of order on the largest scale, just as Easter Sunday has both everything and nothing in common with other Sundays. The sun began to glow blindingly. It bathed the room in light, as if to confirm that it was the star of the show.

...

Harris and I used to eat together frequently. When he finished his plate he would often tap his fork against the plate. I think it was a sort of subconscious alarm... indicating to us that it was time to get back to music.

What is the wulf.?

(perhaps there's nothing to say)

Extasis Cum Sensore!

Words reconcile, are meant to. That's their contribution to empiricism, one could say: a call, a response, the world validated or an error message, recalibration and go again. Though errors pile up -- anticipation the pig in query's blanket -- reconciliation is the goal and time's wagon full of Is it? It is; it isn't. Is it else, then? It is; it isn't (and so on) bumps forward.

Suicide.

What happens when reconciliation is impossible? When the wagon tips and words break into shards, odd bits, only pure logic's thin line leads on, concluding itself. What's a walking talking body to do?

2:00 AM
I called to say you won't hear from me again.
Ever?
Probably ever.

Empiricism's sensory maidens scoop up their pretties -- coned, fluted, toothed, shells in pails. Commingle! But they fail to combine, their domains unencroachable.

4:00 AM
He drove to Neah Bay.

7:00 AM
Arranged his things in a ring.

7:10 AM
Knelt, waiting.... Sunrise. He slit his throat.

Poetry is they say, music is they say, (talk therapy's recursions included)...halfway arrows to the unconscious.

7:15
Upright, his blood streamed, pooled, dripped. Sank in sand.
(A poet, words failed him. Terminal, this time.)

7:18
Still upright.

(The prior time had sliced his chest. To touch his heart.
So he reported, bandaged in squalor at the edge of the airport.
"My nightstand needs ducktape," he complained.)

7:19
Toppled.

They f-f-found him, people who could speak.

Awed, the shells opened their mouths to sing the disembodied voice.

Extasis cum sensore!

sui sido eyesong.

(audible)

Key a senso-l'orifi (symbolo-bref):*

i	Touché (organo grand)
ii	O-diaud-o bi ou 'l
iii	Mots frī-buds
iv	Too soleil-show'd
v	Due idio-nez

i *He hit the ground*

Han'key drop'd a neahbay: *extasis cum sensore*.
Genuflec, un guerr, ni swoon si rough'l.

Carapace, anono slice -- SUMAC
(tous digimano down).
Infatu-lin'd 'n dust 'n gest -- TOUCHE
(dementia rituo).

A-nee un bay: ur pebb'l rou'h
sk'in-velt un trace too indice.
Tu tigh'ly clad -- ha'moon a'sīd
(thumb lat'ly spay'd o'err spre'd).

ii *Things in a ring*

Son écoutra and vivo-maze: *extasis cum sensore*.
Drum ta cum, il swoosh
(on tīd futura).

Ring'a'space, so san'a'pac -- SUMAC
(nous digimano drown).
Lees'a'lensio 'n snail -- ECOUTE
(un ror violō-skī).

A nee a'bay entenrio.
Choloea-à lob intendra.
A'dio, un rim t'wav
(audiens no for'bod'n).
HERO!
Or i a'miss record'n.
CRACKFORT

v *The reptile breeze*

Flare olfacio finale: *extasis cum sensore*.
limbic spacio-craw'l
(t'rept'l memwhif).

Brother's'n a'fore be'hence -- SUMAC
(too digiman un d'one).
Tragi-due smelt ou song -- MALODE
(carpaccio d'nez).

A neahnow. un pebb'l th'ough
(odio sensi-com

comic

comiq

comi'g -- ASSAIL)

Flis a'lit au narro clos'n
(mes naris blossom-tura).
(pass composé, pass decompose)

BLOWHOLE

MALODE

GLASS'T'FULL (nosno)

Un rink'l rant 'n d'one.

N'd'one.

N'dune.

N'f'k'ng f'k'ng dun.

*Key a senso-l'orifi (longue):

i. Touché (organo-grand)

Touch the fingers, digiman, fate's hand, the grand
symphonic under melancholy keys. Finger play and organdy, tissue of regret and dreaming
stretched skein or scrim across the body landscape, a tidal container. Surface. Cover. Punctured
-- SLAMSMACK -- my angry slam, his merely touch, a touch of madness and the end of a life
unskinned. Skin by throat a square foot small enough to dwell. But really an orifice, the
ultimate. Final egress, container uncontained.

ii. O-diaudi-o bi or'l

Ode to dyad and to dying audio biaural to hear the word --
OH DIO -- die of awe or by the spoken word paroled. Oral poison. Death to the bifurcated
binary or merely else (articulated), self-hearing. No sentence yet declaimed. Piano. Softly
considered yet caught. Audiobiography, the ears have it, but askance -- standing at angles --
between a hotly dialogued life.

iii. Mots frī-buds

Moot. Dot. Wordspot. Wordbuds. Spring in lowercase bundled future. Anticipatory frisson-bud cut short. Hyphenated, cupolated, its featured broken mostly in demand. Dormant maybes deeply fired. Tastebuds of no future cent, nipped to congeal. Fricatives in copper.

iv. Too soleil-show'd

One too multiplied, sun-moon self-shown to be one too projection hot. Too far and far too long a short life ago. Exhibition, a cosmic drain. (Solar comic stand-up showed, no laughs, he died.) Five minutes it took on a foreign pleasure beach. Hot voyeurism past the tense clipped by apostrophe, catastrophe, the missing eye echoe eye -- THE EYES HAVE NOT IT -- having seen felt other-felt smelt (and said and heard and buds) too much (projection on its head) too too soleil chaud melted to its zombie. Image opposition crossed along open sensory lines, the act-feel-see-hear-sniff: burn. The sun so hot I froze to death, Susanna, Hosanna, S. Jesse B.

v. Due idio-nez

Simple symmetry, too idios in consensus or nose who knows older news than can be. Idio-savant never always called, until the last expiated. But that belongs in hear him say and say again, believe and misbelieve. Crooked-nez growing long and longer, scenter of his idoverse. Duet for singularity one final time. The reptile breeze induced final calm. In him. An uproar in mine.

**A neahbay il did hymne drow'n a digimano mono.
Go jesse t-t-to'is sensus.
(*Extasis nocum sore.*)**

LEGS

Alana Siegel

Prompted by Meredith Monk's performance, "On Behalf of Nature," what follows in writing is likened to a lens—a magnification of meaning making—less of a review, and more of a bridge, between her questions and my own. What I call "questions," she opens and absorbs into performances—concentrates connections between humans, animals, language, sound, and image.

My reflections will also be performances, sculpted into three stages—"stages" meaning both distinct phases in a development, as well as the theatrical design of a proscenium—the space which marks the border between audience and performer—the porosity of which can be seen doubly as the edge where the division between audience and performer dissolves—

Between reading and writing and thinking and dreaming—through stories and interviews, performance and fact, reverie, research, reflection, experience—I take each as a richness, an edge to begin from.

Stage 1~The Sphinx

Last weekend a friend and I visited the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum in San Jose, specifically to see a reproduction of the Dream Stele of the Sphinx. The story goes that when the sun was at its zenith, prince Thutmose rested, was possessed by dream, and unknowingly on the paws of the Sphinx, the entire form of which was buried in sand.

In his dream, the Sphinx described to him her desecrated body, worn down by the passage of time, and asked him to uncover her, re-commemorate her, and through her power, he would be crowned king. After he had awoken, he was so crowned. He wrote his dream vision on stone, uncovered the Sphinx, and had it erected between her paws.

I say "she" but it is disputed as to whether the Sphinx is a man or a woman—but more precisely—the body of the Sphinx is an animal—a lion, or a cat—only the head appears to be human—and over great stretches of time, the body, and sometimes, the head and the body—the entirety, of this colossal desert sculpture, is covered in sand, and over time, unburied, or revealed.

In an interview, entitled, "On Being," Meredith Monk describes how in her twenties she had a revelation of the voice,

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“which was that the voice could be like an instrument. That I could find a vocabulary built on my own voice, the way you do with movement...that within the voice were male and female, were different ages, were characters and landscapes and different ways of producing sound.”

And later—

“the human voice is the original instrument...so you’re going back to the very beginnings of utterance. In a way it’s like the memory of being a human being.”

What was magnetizing me and my companion to the Sphinx, and specifically, to see the reproduction of a dream written, inscribing the fruition of its promise to a prince? The dream transcription makes clear that it was not exactly the Sphinx that was speaking, but the power of Horemakhet-Khepri-Ra-Atum speaking through its form.

In the program to “On Behalf of Nature,” Monk writes that one of the early inspirations for the title of her performance came from an essay by the poet Gary Snyder, entitled “Writers and the War Against Nature.” Regarding this essay, she writes:

“In it he writes about the role of an artist being that of a “spokesperson for non-human entities communicating to the human realm through dance or song.”

What has always drawn me to the work of Meredith Monk is her liminal vacillation between the word sung, the word spoken, and the measures, the rhythms of speech without words, and her songs which could be speech, but still are somewhat songs. Was the dream of Thutmose a speech or a song? The resistance to be a song and the resistance to be spoken, invites a chimera that can be neither animal nor human, but exists only in utterance—as if utterance was a species, evincing all categories—voice as a vessel shedding likeness.

Stage 2~Elephants

As we turned off the freeway, approaching the museum, my friend suddenly exclaimed, “Was that a yard sale of miniatures?” “I think so,” I responded. She turned the car around—we parked, and got out. Splayed out on the front lawn of a house, were multiple white tables, displaying an array of many, many tiny elephant figurines, in different poses, and colors—some clustered on a plate together—others standing, or sitting alone—some with their trunks in the air—others performing a circus trick—some grotesque, or cartoonish—others beautiful and delicate.

My friend and I expressed to the woman sitting on the steps of the house, how we were admiring her collection. She told us that her mother had recently died, and these elephants were hers. We told her we were sorry, and our enthusiasm altered into a traipsing of quiet observation.

Later in the day, through the glass of the museum, we looked at many Egyptian amulets, either worn by people in life, for protection, or placed in their tombs, for protection in the afterlife. I remembered the elephants I had seen earlier, and felt sad that they weren’t buried with this woman’s mother.

“It’s because we no longer revere the afterlife,” I said to myself, sniffing the suburbs when I later walked out of the museum—the sub-urbs, once the only place where the dead could be buried—outside the city

walls—now the likenesses of animals without the woman who had kept them—“It’s because we no longer revere *life*,” I thought to myself, in revision—“but the afterlife and this life are functions of each other,” I elaborated, and, “Who needed more protection now, her mother in death, or her daughter in life? How does an elephant protect, and from what?”

Stage 3~The Riddle

Mid-way through “On Behalf of Nature,” a man and a woman sat, back faced to the audience, arms around each other, as they soundlessly gazed into an absorbing blue, and later witnessed a cascading film collage of reels of ocean projected onto a screen that we, the audience, watched with them. In an earlier moment, Meredith Monk faced the audience, as she chanted/sung/spoke/called in a high pitched tone, and then angled her body perpendicularly, no longer making sounds, but dramatically moving her mouth—mouthing. In another sequence, either before or after those mentioned, a performer, alone on stage, in a patchwork of cloth, danced a raucous jig—seams and tatters, untethered and waving, clearly assuming the archetype of “the fool.”

My first thought was, “Given that the deep concern of this performance is our ecological crisis, Monk is citing, in a flash of movement, one root of the crisis, characterized in the solitary dance of this performer as “fool”—what it looks like when the human being sings alone inside the human being—embarrassed, but shameless “spokesperson” for no being other than the human—and that so much of human language, historically, is this—a causal parody, foolish in isolation from language other than the human.

In the interview cited earlier, Monk describes how early on, she experienced that through her voice, she could create a vocabulary—I stress, *create*, and not *inherit*. Her vocabulary is not a collection but a concatenation—an image-sound-gesture cyclone where the permutation of each into the other incessantly unsettles, insistently estranges, storms, and so accentuates—which is maybe why I am leaning into anecdotes of my interest in Egypt—or my imagination that a hieroglyph is closer to the “vocabulary” she describes—the voice as primal—apparatus as consensus—installing, more than any universalizing principle—the bodies of beings as the axes of their convergence.

The Sphinx was said to have guarded the road into the city of Thebes, posing a riddle to every traveler who approached—which if they solved, could proceed into the city, but if not, were instantly killed. When Oedipus, the prince, approached, the Sphinx stated the riddle, which was, “What goes on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening?” Oedipus answered, “Man. He crawls on all fours as a baby, then walks on two feet as a man, then walks with a cane in old age.” In his triumph, Oedipus, was not only granted passage into the city, but was crowned king.

Nearing the end of our visit at the museum, my friend suggested we descend into the re-created tomb. I agreed, and as we cut through the foyer to get to the room of its entrance, a tiny baby was crying, wailing, in its mother’s arms. The baby’s body, and its cries seemed to pierce the atmosphere, and our attention. As we walked up to the façade of the tomb, a youngish woman, probably in her 20s or 30s, was posing in the doorway, as her friend attempted to take a picture of her. We were halted by this, and in abeyance, waited for her to move—the woman posing, her hands raised above her and pressing outwards, against the stone of the limin, one leg pointing before her, and her head tilted to the side, grew irritated with her friend who she didn’t think was taking the photograph correctly, or quickly enough. She walked towards her friend with the camera, as my friend and I looked to each other and walked towards the entrance. Precisely as we

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did, we heard a nearing buzzing. Soon seeing that a man in a motorized wheelchair was exiting the tomb, me and my friend parted our walking, and instantly, on either side of the entrance, assumed the positions of sphinxes, which were also traditionally known to guard tombs. The man in the wheelchair either shyly smiled or didn't see us—it was unclear. As the path behind him cleared, we laughed a little to each other, in a strange mutuality, and entered.

On the car ride home, in the red truck of my friend, I saw this evolution of actions as a reclamation of the riddle. The answer was not “Man.” Instead, the first answer was the newborn child, not crawling, but crying, and cradled, in the arms of its mother, and how many legs did this symbiosis of care have, two, or four, or six? The second answer was the woman posing, and her friend taking a photograph of her. How many legs were in this moment? The legs of the woman being photographed, or the legs of this woman and her friend, or the legs of the woman, and the legs of her friend, and the legs in however many images multiplied through her aperture—a mirroring of representations—I read on a placard, “Egyptians believed that an image could become reality in the afterlife.” The third answer was the man in the motorized wheelchair—could wheels be thought as legs—he still had legs but could not walk on them, although he moved—me and my friend crouched next to the door, becoming Sphinxes, not to guard, but be in sympathy. The riddle reached its end, but its beginning, in our bodies.

Ever since I was audience to “On Behalf of Nature,” I’ve been looking into the eyes of cats more earnestly as they jump out from behind a car, or cross the street. This past weekend, I watched a herd of elk, hypnotized by their paced, slow, measure. I’ve been eating more vegetables, and looking up how to cook them in ways that activate their innermost essence. I say all of this as if in confession—which I am, and wonder how many other people are, or aspire to be, in the orchestral resurrection of all of life as living.

At the end of our day, when my friend and I returned to Oakland, we walked up to her yellow house, and the woman who lives below her, whose name is Lola Lovely, yelled to us that, “American Pharaoh won the Triple Crown.”

We didn't know what she meant, so she explained to us in detail, the meaning of the event, and its rarity. My friend and I looked at each other lopsidedly, our minds swirling with ages intersecting, images of power and dynasty, upside down, and shaking—the echo of the animal and human overcoming—and that she informed us of men who had been racing on horses, a bastardization in the form of recreation, of men on top of animals, and riding them—but in a secret reconciliation—the being with the title, Pharaoh, was not the man, but the animal—the horse.

And as we parted company with Lola, we realized she was wearing cheetah patterned leggings, lighthearted, and out in the sunshine, gardening.

A musical score for the song 'The Rose Tree'. It features two staves: a treble staff and a bass staff, both in the key of B-flat major (two flats) and 4/4 time. The melody is written in the treble staff, and the accompaniment is in the bass staff. The music consists of eight measures. The first measure has a whole rest in the treble and a half note G2 in the bass. The second measure has a half note A2 in the treble and a half note F2 in the bass. The third measure has a half note Bb2 in the treble and a half note E2 in the bass. The fourth measure has a half note C3 in the treble and a half note D2 in the bass. The fifth measure has a half note Bb2 in the treble and a half note C2 in the bass. The sixth measure has a half note A2 in the treble and a half note B1 in the bass. The seventh measure has a half note G2 in the treble and a half note A1 in the bass. The eighth measure has a half note F2 in the treble and a half note G1 in the bass. The score ends with a double bar line.

Ab Major can be inferred, in spite of the extreme chromaticism.

8	9	b9		8	b7					b6		
	b7	6		b6	5	b5	6	b6	5	b5	4	5
	3	4		3		b3	4	3	b3	2	b2	3

Translated for the convenience of modern musicians into triadic entities:

$$A^b \quad A^{b9} \quad B^{bb+} \quad F^{b+} A^b \quad A^{\emptyset(7)} \quad D^b \quad F^{b+} \quad A^{b\min} \quad \text{impossible} \quad B^{bb\Delta} \quad A^b$$

(unless $B^{b7!}$) (maj 7)

or $A^{b^{\circ}} \not\geq 2$

(very unorthodox)

(Is this what G had a problem with?)

Moussorgsky

$A^b:$ I I₉ bII^+ bVI I $i^{\theta}(7)$ IV bVI^+ i — bII_7 I
 pp —
 Suggestions of function V₉ / IV(_{sub} $b6$) I($b6-5$) I($b6-5$)

Revelation of the inherent logic: (extra “free” part left out, as G. has left out the voice line)



Thus the passage is revealed as nothing but (!) a descent in parallel major thirds.

(Of course M. is correct in using the enharmonic equivalent, which shows the directionality)

* permissible 8ve displacement
(an evidence of the subtle variety animating this otherwise staid chorale)

(It could even be said that the very existence of chords is an illusion.)

(It could also be argued that given the ubiquitous downward scales, everything that might be considered dissonant resolves correctly, and so the very concept of a hierarchy of interval tensions has been neutralized.)

And yet there is a suggestion of a hidden functionality too.

(Does not the Db chord hint at a more significant role?) Consider:



* this Cb less explicable except by a preference for the sonority.
(After all, there are already enough half-step resolutions!)

** the Fb admittedly comes from nowhere.
an extra note -- note where placed -- to color the cadence (no mere 4-voice exercise here).
Resolves down to the otherwise missing 5th of the tonic chord, a weight in the bass, also serving the sense of finality. Consider then that Fb as an appoggiatura.

Notice though, that the I chord itself hardly exists, being continually compromised by an extraneous passing tone. Indeed, the only other purely triadic sound, other than the initiating and culminating tonics, is---even if inverted---the Db subdominant occurring (is this just by chance?) right at the halfway point.

Thus we might meaningfully reduce all the other intervening chords, whether seemingly tonic or subdominant or not, to passing tones. . . .

leaving I-----IV $\frac{6}{4}$ -----I

This IV then serving as neighboring tones to the permanent tonic.

Hence, a highly elaborated version of that simple and familiar Plagal Cadence.

Philip Corner

Feb. 2005

“Eventfulness is really boring”:

Robert Ashley as Minimalist

Kyle Gann

I hope it does not seem merely opportunistic to appear with a paper on Robert Ashley as minimalist just after I have published a book on Ashley. One of the things I find historically fascinating about minimalism is the magnetic field it cast on all sides, attracting some composers and repelling others, to the point that some composers whom we do not consider part of the movement led careers that we cannot adequately describe without alluding to it as explanation. Morton Feldman is certainly one of these, perhaps James Tenney, and also Robert Ashley. (For instance, my composition teacher Peter Gena recalled, in the early 1970s, being anxiously called into Feldman’s office to look at sketches for his newest piece. Feldman asked fearfully, “Do you think it sounds too much like Steve Reich?”)

In 2009 I interviewed Robert Ashley for a book I was writing about him. He made a statement that rather surprised me, and I want to play you the audio because his delivery is so evocative:

The only thing that’s interesting to me right now is that, up to me and a couple of other guys, music had always been about eventfulness: like, when things happened, and if they happened, whether they would be a surprise, or an enjoyment, or something like that... And I was never interested in eventfulness. I was only interested in sound. I mean, just literally, sound in the Morton Feldman sense.... There’s a quality in music that is outside of time, that is not related to time. And that has always fascinated me... A lot of people are back into eventfulness. But it’s very boring. Eventfulness is really boring.¹

As composers of his generation go, Robert Ashley is not someone often thought of as a minimalist. In fact, a case for the exact opposite would be easy to make. At a certain period in his career he earned a reputation as being the prime exemplar of what we then liked to call *information overload*. For instance, the initial 1979 version of his opera *Perfect Lives*, as recorded on the famous “Yellow Album,” was pretty spare, but by 1982 he had overlaid the piece with so many layers of musical activity that the original became difficult to locate beneath the multi-channeled audio surface. His next opera, *Atalanta*, was a chaos of improvisation. In *Foreign Experiences* Ashley underlaid his text and music, in the first act, with a 12-tone piano sonata he had written decades earlier. Ashley’s opera *Improvement: Don Leaves Linda* is entirely based on a fanatical precompositional scheme involving a 24-note row. When I interviewed him about the piece in 1991, he added, “Of course! I’m a serialist! What else would I do?”² In the introduction to his book

1 Interview with the author, June 11, 2009.

2 Gann, “Shouting at the Dead,” *Village Voice*, October 8, 1991 (Vol. XXXVI No. 41, pp. 89-90)

Outside of Time: Ideas about Music, titled “Speech as Music,” he wrote:

For some reason that I have never understood (and don’t fully understand today) I have always been attracted to music that is irrationally difficult. I don’t mean difficult in terms of endurance or effects. I mean difficult in the sense that there are many things going on at the same time... What I think today my problem came from is that even in piano music, when there are a lot of things happening very fast... the complexity resembles the complexity of speech. I came to discover very gradually that I was fatally attracted to the complexity of speech....³

And he goes on to make a veiled complaint about minimalism, that around 1970, there was an “official announcement from New York and Washington”: “The announcement said simply, there is a new kind of music; it is very simple; everybody will come to understand, and we will forget about all of that foolishness that has been going on.”⁴

At the same time, though, Ashley included in *Outside of Time* a new (2004) article titled “to begin again with ‘music,’” in which he talked about the central ideas that had always been crucial to his music, beginning with the “drone concept”:

I use the term “drone” [he wrote] to mean any music that seems not to change over time. Or music that changes so slowly that the changes seem almost imperceptible. Or music that has so many repetitions of the same melodic-harmonic pattern that the pattern is clearly secondary to another aspect of the form. (And I use the term “drone” though from the beginning it has often been used by critics in its pejorative sense, meaning “nothing is happening.”)⁵

He describes this as an American idea, and it is clear that he thinks all of his music has been drone music (as opposed to what he calls “timeline music,” meaning everything else), even when it doesn’t contain anything that we minimalist scholars would think of as a drone.

Bob doesn’t know I’m giving this paper, and it may be that he would totally disagree with my premises here. But he and I have disagreed before, and in fact he raises quite a public disagreement with me in the introduction I quoted from.

To disagree with him a little bit, then, it did seem to me, at the time of the 2009 interview, that Ashley’s claim that he had only been interested in “sound, in the Morton Feldman sense” was something of an illusion of hindsight. In a 1961 interview in *Source* magazine, Ashley once claimed that ever since John Cage’s use of empty time structures, the guiding metaphor of music was now no longer sound but time, and the ultimate result might be “a music that wouldn’t necessarily involve anything but the presence of people... It seems to me [he continued] that the most radical redefinition of music that I could think of would be one that defines ‘music’ without reference to sound.”⁶ Like many other composers in the 1950s, Ashley had been highly impressed by Cage’s use of empty time structures, the lengths of which were determined in advance before the sounds within them were composed. I have sometimes referred to Cage’s works using macro/microcosmic time structures as being proto-postminimalist, in that they seemed to anticipate postminimalist music rather than minimalism per se. If that is true, then we could say that Ashley’s works inspired by Cage’s time structures might be neo-proto-postminimalist, and by a musicohistorical arithmetic

3 Ashley, *Outside of Time: Ideas about Music*, p. 38.

4 Ibid., p. 54.

5 Ashley, *Outside of Time: Ideas about Music*, p. 96.

6 Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1974), p. 10.

that should put them somewhere in the minimalist ballpark.

Born in 1930, Ashley is a little older than the oldest composers we consider card-carrying minimalists, but he knew about the style almost from its origins. He directed the ONCE festival from the beginnings in 1961, and two of the original minimalists, La Monte Young and Terry Jennings, were featured at the second ONCE festival in 1962; Jennings, already a heroin addict at the time, ended up staying at Ashley's apartment for awhile. While there is no discernible influence of their music on his at the time, a couple of Ashley's better-known ONCE festival pieces were, in fact, explicitly repetitive and extremely restricted in their range of materials. One was *She Was a Visitor*, the finale of his opera *That Morning Thing* (1967), in which the narrator repeats the title phrase over and over as the other performers extend the phonemes of the narrator's phrase into a sibilant continuum, sustaining each sound for one full breath. This piece seems to me inarguably minimalist.

A conceptually similar piece called *Fancy Free* (1969) was written for the stuttering voice of Alvin Lucier, who was supposed to read the text over and over as four cassette recorder operators recorded his speech. The recorders are supposed to play back any mistake he makes, and the piece ends when he first gets through the entire text uninterrupted. Of course there is an obvious conceptual similarity here to Lucier's own piece *I Am Sitting in a Room*, also based on a repeated text – the piece which Mimi Johnson refers to as “Alvin's *Bolero*.” And it is worth re-emphasizing that Tom Johnson's first use of the word minimal to describe music (in the *Village Voice* of March 30, 1972) was applied to music not by the composers we now think of as minimalist, but to works by Alvin Lucier and Mary Lucier.

Almost from the beginning, Ashley's music first involved the setting up of certain chunks of time, the sounds to fill them being decided upon later, but this determination was often made via group collaboration. Within the conceptualist milieu of the ONCE festivals of the 1960s, what was most distinctive about Ashley was that he seemed less interested in sonic patterns than in the social situation of the performance. Far from being interested in “sound in the Morton Feldman sense,” many of his early pieces allow the performers to choose the sounds, and show an almost total lack of interest on Ashley's part as to what the sounds are. The combination of this attitude, along with his use of uniform time units and repetition, results in what one might call a “randomized minimalism,” in which the gambit of sounds within a piece is closely circumscribed, the process might be a subtle and limited one, but the sounds might be anything at all.

For instance, Ashley's seminal 1961 piece *Public Opinion Descends Upon the Demonstrators* takes an alternation of noise and silence as its only structure. Ashley's most famous ONCE composition, *The Wolfman* (1964), involves a singer singing single notes of 13 seconds each, changing within each breath one aspect of the sound (either pitch, loudness, vowel, or closure). Amplified up to maximum feedback, the piece may have a maximalist noise component, but as experienced by the performer it is as tightly disciplined and as limited in its possibilities as many early minimalist classics. *in memoriam...CRAZY HORSE (symphony)* (1961-2) is structured as a series of regular pulses in which the players are supposed to sustain a so-called “reference sonority,” changing some aspect of it as certain symbols come up in the circular performance chart. A 1966 recording of the work on the Advance label was relentlessly noisy. However, in 2007 the Ensemble MAE in Holland produced a recording of a very similar piece in the same series, *in memoriam... ESTEBAN GOMEZ (quartet)*, using a drone with a consonant major third as their reference sonority. In other words, there is nothing in the description of these pieces that precludes a minimalist-sounding realization. This recording sounds classically minimalist, and in fact rather similar to James Tenney's *Critical Band*, which I think of as really hard-core minimalism. This comparison is our first hint today that, as dissonant and modernist as they seemed in the original performances, some of Ashley's early ONCE festival works were minimalist in concept, and could be made to sound classically minimalist merely by a change in the materials chosen by the performers.

But Ashley is consistent in saying that he never liked eventfulness, and found it boring. His music has never depended on the sequential timing of events; those time fields are always open and, in a certain way, uniform. Staticness and the foregrounding of an eternal present are aspects Ashley has always had in common with the minimalists.

The second phase of Ashley's music begins in 1979 with the first of his mature operas, *Perfect Lives*. Almost all of Ashley's operas have certain minimalist aspects, usually limitations of tempo, rhythmic structure, or harmony. For instance, in the five operas *Perfect Lives*, *Improvement*, *Atalanta*, *eL/Aficionado*, and *Now Eleanor's Idea*, the tempo is always 72 beats per minute throughout. The tempo in the remaining opera of this group, *Foreign Experiences*, is 90 beats per minute. The duration of each opera is set in advance. Each of the seven scenes of *Perfect Lives* was intended to be 24 minutes and 40 seconds, which in 1979 was the legal minimum length of a half-hour television show, allowing for commercials. Originally, each of the four operas of the tetralogy *Now Eleanor's Idea* was supposed to be 6,336 beats long, which is 88 minutes (4 x 22) at a tempo of 72 beats per minute. *eL/Aficionado* was exempted from that requirement because it was not originally composed as part of the tetralogy, and its tempo is not continuously articulated.

Each scene of *Perfect Lives* follows a single rhythmic template throughout. The first episode, "The Park," has a 13-beat meter, "The Supermarket" five beats, "The Bank" nine, and so on. In quite a few passages this results in a repetitive ostinato running through a scene for several minutes at a time.

In addition to the rhythmic units, harmonies are also often structured repetitively. *Atalanta*, a monumental work potentially three times as long as any given performance, is performed entirely over a progression of six chords: Bb, Ab, G, C7, Eb, G. This is not always apparent because of the improvisatory latitude granted the performers, but the chord changes theoretically come at regular intervals. Harmonically, *eL/Aficionado* is based entirely on a repeating series of 16 chords, in four groups of four, each group unified by a single scale. In the scenes of the opera that are titled "My Brother Called" (scenes 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 10), the chord changes every 18 beats, or every 15 seconds, and one line of the text is sung over that chord. In addition, while the singer Thomas Buckner improvises his lines within the scale, the initial note of each phrase is determined by a repeating sequence. The first scene of *Dust* (1998) has simple chords repeating in an isorhythm of 1, 2, 3, 5, 3, 2, 1 lines, the rhythm repeated over and over again.

One of Ashley's most conceptually minimalist works is the opera *Celestial Excursions*. Although it's also one of his most musically intricate works, the entire piece uses only the C-major scale. Each scene uses a certain chord, with different reciting tones for the singers, and the scenes differ harmonically by having a different note in the bass – and that note is never C, so there's never a feeling of resting on the tonic. This is an overall structure very similar to Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*.

Of course, what keeps people from thinking of these pieces as minimalist is most obviously the text. Were we to listen to them without the text, long passages might take on a minimalist aura, but the speaking of a text over a static background tends to erase any impression of minimalism. Text tends to be linear and unidirectional. We listen to hear what will be said next. There are clearly minimalist text pieces, by Jackson Mac Low and others, but they tend to be restricted to few words, with much repetition and a Gertrude Stein-ish disregard for syntax. Ashley's opera texts are not of this nature; indeed they tend to be incredibly verbose and extended, with long stories.

However, Ashley's idea of opera, to the extent we're inclined to acquiesce to it, is that speech is music, and that we do not listen to it for meaning alone. Several operas deal with the tendency of profanity – that is, intentionally meaningless words – to slow down thought, and as he asks rhetorically in *Atalanta*, "Who could speak if every word had meaning?" The texts are filled with gentle nonsequiturs and incomplete word-pictures. Each phrase means something, but the totality

of what the text means is more than usually in doubt. In other words, Ashley's texts are narrative in appearance, but he uses a variety of devices to render their narrativity ambiguous. While he denies that his writing is stream-of-consciousness, he also denies that an opera can have a plot. Ashley's operas do possess background plots, but those plots are rarely inferable from the text of the opera; they are best read in the liner notes. As he has written,

At the opera I am transported to a place and time where there is no disorder. There is disorder on stage, and it is called melodrama. We don't believe it. This is important: that we don't believe it. We do believe... what happens in the movies.... Therefore, opera can have no plot. It is foolish to argue that opera – any opera – can have a plot; that is, that the “characters” and their apparent “actions” and the apparent “consequences” are related in any way. Opera can be story-telling only.⁷

This may not convince the dubious that Ashley's words are simply melody, though he sometimes speaks as though he believes that's the case. At least one can say that the time element in Ashley's texts is frequently unimportant, that one statement does not lead to another statement, nor one episode need to be previous to another episode for the sake of understanding. Ashley's words, frequently nonlinear and read in his own calmly inflected voice, or chanted on or around one note, can be heard in themselves as a kind of randomized minimalism. We will come to a perhaps more convincing example shortly.

However, when we move to the most recent phase of Ashley's music, the parallels to minimalism become more and more striking. As modernism moved, from its heyday in the 1950s or '60s, to minimalism and the New Tonality, so did Ashley's music move from often maximum confusion and chaos to more meditative continua. This has been especially true of his non-operatic works, starting from 1988 on. Ashley's late instrumental works are in a style that I would call randomized postminimalism. That is, the choice of pitches is limited, the tonality usually clear, the rhythm based in a steady pulse, but within the available gamut the note-to-note choices are determined by some random or quasi-random procedure. In his piano piece *Van Cao's Meditation* and the ensemble piece for Relache *Outcome Inevitable*, the order of notes was determined by a systematic document Ashley had been using in the early 1960s for the ONCE festival pieces, what he calls an “encyclopedia of proportions and combinations” of the numbers 1 through 5. Although he's used it for many pieces, the document mysteriously disappeared about the time I came to write the book on him, and I've never been able to take a look at it – kind of a strange thing given how neat and well organized most of Ashley's files are.

Van Cao's Meditation (1992) was inspired by a photo of Van Cao, the composer of the Vietnamese national anthem, sitting at what was supposedly one of only two pianos in the country at the time. The music is made up entirely of 8th-notes on the pitches Bb, C, Db, Eb, and Fb, with an occasional fermata-laden cadence on some octave A-flats. Texturally and tonally the piece is minimalist in the extreme, but the ordering of pitches completely inscrutable.

Outcome Inevitable (1991), for the Relache ensemble, is grounded in an insistent repeating middle C in the bass, in constant 16th-notes. The rhythmic structure is determined by repeating rhythms tapped out softly on a bass drum in odd groupings. The series of changing rhythms outlines a seven-part structure, each part of which features a solo by a different instrument. The melodies all consist merely of rising scales interrupted by occasional leaps (or steps) downward to keep the line within a fairly narrow range. Each phrase consists of a small random number of

7 Ashley, “The Future of Music,” lecture delivered at the University of California at San Diego, April 15, 2000, unpublished typescript, p. 9.

16th-notes (up to 6) leading to a sustained note. Lasting 16 minutes, the piece is a lovely evocation of timelessness, drawn from a clear and endlessly elaborated idea, but quite unpredictable in its details.

When Famous Last Words Fail You (1997) was written for singer Thomas Buckner to sing with the American Composers Orchestra, but it was so minimalist that it's never been performed well. The entire orchestra plays only the pitch A in various octaves; the conductor does not beat time, but merely controls volume, as the instruments are cued by key words in the singer's text. Unwilling to do this, Dennis Russell Davies did not rehearse the piece well, and gave what Ashley considered a miserable and misleading performance. The piece has never been heard as it was intended, but surely an orchestra piece using only one pitch merits some mention in a history of minimalism.

With the short opera *Your Money My Life Goodbye* (1998) we come to one of Ashley's most minimalist works. Its musical accompaniment is a series of pulsing A-flat major triads at a pulse of 216 per minute. The text comprises 892 lines of seven syllables each, each line divided 3+2+2, with no line hyphenated over to the next. There are 15 pulsing chords per vocal line; I think no one would ever notice this simply listening to the piece, but if you conduct the pulsing chords in 15/8 (that is, five groups of three), you can predict the onset of each phrase. Each vocal line is meant to be read in a rhythm that parallels that of the title, "Your money, my life, good-bye." The piece does have a plot about a spy married to a nefarious woman financier who brings down large corporations *a la* Bernie Madoff – and this a full decade before Madoff became a public name. But if you listen to the text in seven-syllable increments, it can virtually cease to be heard as text and sound like a repeating rhythm, like those optical illusions that can be seen either as a vase or as two faces. The effect illustrates perhaps better than anything in Ashley's output his idea of speech being musical in and of itself. Towards the end of the work, in another complication, a bass ostinato starts grouping the chords into a syncopated 6/4 meter. Thus every 15 chords is marked by seven syllables of the text, and the ostinato creates a harmonic rhythm of 24 chords, for a quite complex but minimalistically steady five-against-eight cross-rhythm. I think we may have to call *Your Money My Life Goodbye* the most hard-core minimalist opera since *Einstein on the Beach*.

In addition, Ashley's second recording of *Atalanta*, made in 2010, twenty-five years after the first recording, shows how far Ashley's style moved towards minimalism in that quarter-century. The 1985 version is particularly chaotic by Ashley's standards, though there are passages, such as this one, in which the six repeating chords and the recurring melody are clearly audible. By the 2010 recording, though, improvisation is absent, and the electronic backgrounds engineered by Tom Hamilton are consistent and predictable. In the first scene, "The Etchings," each chord appears only once and lasts five minutes. In "Empire," of which we'll hear an excerpt here of the first chord going into the second, the music takes more than half an hour to move through the six chords only twice. The second compact disc that contains the series of stories called "Au Pair" (text by Jacqueline Humbert) is entirely on an E-flat chord. Ashley unifies the stories by a motive of two rising half-steps, and each story continues the upward chromatic scale where the previous one leaves off, a very subtle kind of additive process.

Ashley's lifelong commitment to both complexity and the drone concept make him an interesting not-very-minimal minimalist. Over the decades, the drone concept has remained a constant in his music, while the complexity, while never absent, has gradually become more transparent, a randomization of details rather than overloading of layers. Ashley's born-again Feldmanism after age 60 may have colored his early intentions through 20-20 hindsight, but his relentless pursuit of uneventfulness has brought him into minimalist territory again and again.

Memories of Bob

Thomas Buckner

I feel very fortunate to have been able to work with Robert Ashley singing in his operas and developing a new style of music making for over thirty years. Here is but one of the many 'stories of the music', as Bob called them in 'The Producer Speaks'.

Back in 1982, the Arch Ensemble for Experimental Music, a 23 piece contemporary music ensemble, based in the San Francisco Bay Area, of which I was co director with composer/conductor Robert Hughes, received a consortium commissioning grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. We chose to commission Robert Ashley, who had been the director of the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College in Oakland, because we agreed that his was the most original mind in contemporary music. I will never forget the performance he gave of 'Wolfman' in one of our concerts. I insisted that the commission be for a vocal piece, as I was a great admirer of 'Perfect Lives', which was brand new then. Bob Ashley chose to make a composition for baritone and Chamber Orchestra using a text, 'Odalisque', from his then current project, the opera 'Atalanta, Acts of God', rather than give us an occasional piece.

Little did I know that this was to become my audition to sing in the opera. He had to write the speech rhythms in conventional notation, since I was then still in California and he had already moved to New York and he couldn't just show me what he wanted, as he would have preferred. During the time between the composition of the piece and the performance, I too moved to New York. As I was preparing the piece, the rhythmic notation of which was very complicated, as it attempted to really show the exact rhythms of speech, my room mate, the great hand drummer Big Black, (who at that time was playing with Dizzy Gillespie), learned the rhythms by ear and played along in rhythmic unison, so when I went down to Bob's studio to sing it for him, the rhythms were really locked in. He seemed to be very happy. He decided to come out to California for the performance, and afterwards invited me to sing in the opera's upcoming performances in Rome. He had the three 'Odalisque' arias that opened each of the opera's three acts translated into Italian, so the audience could understand at least some of the opera, and we were off to Rome. Rather than strict rhythmic notation, I was now to allow the natural declamation of the text, the rise and fall in pitch and the rhythms of natural speech, to suggest the spontaneous invention of melodic material that fit into the harmonic structure of the aria. I had the added advantage of the fact that the great 'Blue' Gene Tyranny, a long time collaborator of Bob's since the days of the Once Group, as well as "Buddy the world's greatest piano player" from 'Perfect Lives', was improvising on the synthesizer. It was as if I had died and gone to heaven. Bob's idea was that the character I was playing was in the words and the character made himself evident through repetition. The character did indeed take over, as it has in every piece of Bob's I've sung since. He has a way of giving the performer everything he needs and nothing that gets in the way, so he can fly with the music.

Last night, I sang a tribute concert to Bob at Roulette in Brooklyn, a venue on whose board Bob once sat and that he loved. The event was magical. I think it is because Robert Ashley was able to put so much of himself into his compositions. It was almost as if he was there.

Remembering Robert Ashley

Kara Feely and Travis Just, Object Collection

When we first thought of the idea of adapting Robert Ashley's Automatic Writing for a live staging, we didn't tell anybody about it for a year. The original recording is powerful magic and working with it was not to be done lightly. Finally, in early 2011 we approached Bob about it. His immediate reaction was, "it can't be done". This wasn't surprising, we weren't sure if it could be done either. After about a minute of convincing and laying out our plan he suddenly and completely reversed his position to "let's do it!" We loved him for that. Bob came to see our own work and was very supportive when many weren't. What this means to us is indescribable. He is gone now, but his radicality and openness is going to be felt for a long time to come. An astonishing artist and a good guy.

Ashley: A remembrance

Robert Haskins

I first learned about Robert Ashley when I was studying piano at the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University. Peabody had a commitment to new music, but it was then not very adventuresome, nor was I particularly aware of much contemporary music past, say, Vincent Persichetti. Still, I always talked to the composers because they were usually the funniest and most interesting people at school. Then, in 1982, I discovered the book *Soundpieces: Interviews with American Composers*, an ecumenical and often hilarious group of conversations with people as different from each other as Ross Lee Finney and Philip Glass, and a book that familiarized me with a much wider world of new music than I'd known before. Reading the interview with Ashley, I was struck by his interest in the human voice as a musical instrument: much of the remainder passed over my head like a cloud.

Then in 1985, while studying in England, I saw parts of Ashley's *Perfect Lives (Private Parts)* thanks to the episode on him in Peter Greenaway's TV series *Four American Composers*. I can still recall his exquisite delivery of this line: "He pours himself a small drink in a fluted plastic glass sans ice. / He thinks to himself, If I were from the bigtown, I would be calm and debonair." The first time I heard the line, I simply found it funny; he reminded me very much of the great actors from the heyday of TV sitcoms. But soon I began to sense that much more was involved: how much pause, for instance, before "sans ice," how quickly he said those words as opposed to "a fluted plastic glass," how he modulated his nasal, somewhat avuncular, Midwest accent. These were musical decisions, but also theatrical ones.

In short, Ashley's music was something I scarcely could have imagined before, and it helped me become more interested in performing music-theatrical works that involve reading or reciting text. I would say, too, that he introduced me to a way of listening and thinking about music that allowed me to experience it in all its novelty and surprise without necessarily feeling I needed to understand it or even recall it later. In the years that followed, Ashley's acclaim seems only to have increased, and justly so, not least for the significant body of music-theater works he made after 1980. He seems never to have doubted this would happen: in that 1982 interview, he correctly portrayed himself as part of the vanguard of American composers who wanted to invent a personal music and to be involved in its performance; he also predicted that younger composers would continue along the same path.

And so they have, but it seems to me some of the best known and most active among today's youngest composers lack two things Ashley had in abundance: the ability to surprise audiences and a sense of great purpose, even urgency, in making music. I don't know why they lack these qualities, though I suspect it has to do with political complacency (both in new music and in the United States generally), with an abundance of music from all styles that needs to be absorbed (and too little time to absorb it), and with an overly slavish sense of obligation to write music that cannot possibly offend anybody. If new music manages to get itself out of this cul-de-sac, it will be through rediscovering its sense of adventure and fruitful controversy—revisiting Robert Ashley's music would be a great way to start.

Remembering Robert Ashley

Kevin Holm-Hudson

I first encountered Robert Ashley's music as a music major at Syracuse University, taking composition lessons with a professor who was a certifiable genius; he was in the habit of recommending composers and musicians to me, as varied as Andrzej Panufnik and the B-52s. One day he passed along the now famous "yellow record," the "work-in-progress" version of *Perfect Lives (Private Parts)*, saying, "See if you can make anything of this. I can't." I was intrigued. Here were lush Polymoog strings drifting in and out of the mix, the hypnotic tabla, and Bob Ashley's voice, describing a scene, expressing the thoughts of unnamed characters, and recounting impressions seemingly as they drifted into his subconscious.

The albums that followed—*The Bar* and Bob's "dance mix" album *Music Word Fire and I would Do It Again (coo coo)* both ostensibly offered additional glimpses of the development of *Perfect Lives*, but musically they couldn't be more different from the "yellow record," or from each other. A couple of years later I met Bob for the first time when he came to Syracuse—not as a guest of the College of Visual and Performing Arts ("the unrecognized continue to die of striving," Bob observed on *Improvement*), but as a guest of the Newhouse College of Communications. There I got to see fragments of "The Backyard" and "The Living Room," and I learned about the "templates" used to structure the opera for the first time. Afterward, I was such a fanboy that I asked for his autograph, on a copy of the Sonic Arts Union record he made with Alvin Lucier, David Behrman, and Gordon Mumma. Ashley good-humoredly signed the album, remarking, "I haven't seen one of these records in years."

Perfect Lives inhabited my consciousness for years afterward—I even bought the full soundtrack on cassette and used to jog to it(!)—until I decided to make it the topic of my doctoral thesis. This eventually turned into a massive project, as I soon learned how deep and intricate the structure of *Perfect Lives*, its music, text, and images, really was—"it's so beautiful, and how they do it no one knows."

I interviewed Bob several times during the writing of the thesis, and there were many letters. He dug out his original legal-pad sketches for the structure of all seven episodes. He passed on the addresses of John Sanborn and "Blue" Gene Tyranny so that I could contact them. One time I remember asking him something about the recitation "tone" of "The Living Room" and, verifying his answer before giving it, he recited the opening lines to himself with the exact inflection that I had long before memorized in all my listenings.

When the thesis was done, I wanted to present a copy to Bob. I wanted to surprise him, so my wife and I traveled to New York. Mimi Johnson helped us concoct a ruse involving

Remembering Robert Ashley

having Bob come over to the Lovely Music offices to “sign some paperwork.” He recognized me instantly, gratefully accepted the thesis, and invited us up to his loft studio, where he shared some chocolate cake with us and I got to hear—and see his score notes for—*eL/Aficionado* as it was then being developed. Later I received a warm thank-you letter for the thesis.

I remember, on the horrific day of 9/11, thinking that Bob’s studio was perilously close to Ground Zero. I sent him a quick e-mail, saying, “Please let me know that you are alright.” Miraculously, I heard back from him right away; he and Mimi were in Portugal (as I recall), touring a version of *Atalanta*.

I was never fortunate to have studied with Bob. I never got to see any of the later works performed after *Now Eleanor’s Idea*. I was never in his “inner circle.” But his ideas, his music, are in the inner circle of my thoughts. Bob’s music, like all great art, changes you. His ideas challenge you. “I’m not the same person that I used to be.”

Hammering in a nail where you intended to hang a large canvas is easy.

Ben did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Painting a standard canvas the same color as the wall on which it is hung is easy.

Claude Rutault did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Making a stack of white paper sheets of standard format is easy.

Giulio Paolini did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Stretching a wire on a wall from the bottom left-hand corner up to the top of the wall in the middle, then down to the bottom right-hand corner is easy.

Robert Barry did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Filling a room with artificial fog until no-one can see a yard ahead is easy.

Ann Veronica Janssens did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Bisecting at 45° the two short sides of a board (1 inch x 10 inches. x 5 inches.) and placing them on the ground is easy.

Richard Nonas did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Buying a can of crabmeat, opening it, emptying it, taking off the label and re-sticking it carefully so that it is legible on the interior of the can is easy.

Genpei Akasegawa did it and now everyone else can do the same.

"The easier it is, the more beautiful it is"

Painting an orange white and putting it with other oranges in a white bowl is easy.
Bengt af Klintberg did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Hanging downy feathers on a wire is easy.
Hans Haacke did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Placing a folded sheet of A3 paper on which the words THANK YOU are written, on a white plinth is easy.
Hans-Peter Feldmann did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Building a makeshift shelter out of cardboard, planks, tape, string or anything at all is easy.
Tadashi Kawamata did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Blowing on a mirror to make mist, then photographing that mist is easy.
David Horvitz did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Making geometrical figures with breadcrumbs to attract and choreograph pigeons is easy.
Jenny Holzer did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Putting a fly on a plank and squashing it with another plank is easy.
John Baldessari did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Covering the floor with paper sheets by attaching them to each other is easy.
Milan Knizak did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Filling a steel tube (14 inches in diameter x 15 inches long) with cotton is easy.
Katsuro Yoshida did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Letting three sheets of white paper, six feet square, each blow away in front of the exhibition is easy.
Lee Ufan did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Placing a card on a horizontal surface, placing a straw in the center of the card, lighting one of the straws with a match, and when the flame has gone out, hanging the card on the wall is easy.
Robert Watts did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Crumpling six hundred sheets of white paper (2 1/2 ft. x 2 1/2 ft.) and making a pile of them is easy.
Reiner Ruthenbeck did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Collecting pollen from a hazel tree and carefully sprinkling it on the ground to make a big yellow square four feet on each side is easy.
Wolfgang Laib did it and now everyone else can do the same.

"The easier it is, the more beautiful it is"

Fixing a yellow fluorescent tube (and its housing-support) on the wall at 45° is easy.
Dan Flavin did it in homage to Brancusi and now everyone else can do the same.

Trying to make a horizontal line with a black marker along the top of a wall is easy.
Making another, just below the first line without touching it, with a red marker is also easy. Starting over with a yellow marker, then a blue marker, then again red, then yellow, then blue, then red and so on down the wall might get tedious but is easy.
Sol LeWitt did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Finding five plastic bottles of different shapes, removing their labels, and grouping the bottles together on the ground is easy.
Tony Cragg did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Completely hiding a TV screen with a mirror, then turning it on to watch your favorite TV show is easy.
Willem de Ridder did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Taking four paintings (2 ft. x 1 ft. each) and fixing four mirrors of the same size above them is easy.
Art and Language did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Making a grease stain in the corner of a wall is easy.
Joseph Beuys did it and now everyone else can do the same.

There Where You Do Not Think To Be Thinking

Tamas Panitz

Charles Stein's poem is a drill, unwinding— after all it *is* book 12 of *Views from Tornado Island*— a volatile, generous force nexal to the generative powers of Being itself. How drill? See similes:

My Heredity, I say,
is like a Black Box —
a Crystal
in a cloud
above Tornado Island,
a volatile flux of sentient particulates
compressed in such a cloud as such a Crystal.

(First stanza)

Simile here is equation (perhaps the longest in affect since Achilles' Shield): the characters size each other up, put on each other's meanings and strut out from their bewildering differences, each simile incisively made; linked shadow—chains winched up skyward, up from readerly down. We spend the poem in a kind of continuously skewed or screwed up, quasi-celestial (though often chthonic) paradise; or else must become *babes of the abyss*, surrendered to the sheer experience of cognitive vertigo (the first ten pages are sufficient to baffle all computing power, if *sentient* particulates wasn't enough to dissuade that sort of thing) so one can *view* the “productive generosity, as it were, of Being,” as the blurb puts it.

In other words, this poem demands to be read as if by Poetry itself.

The poem “literally series or conjures itself into existence”(to continue to quote from the blurb) via a Cryptographic Matrix. As Stein writes in the appendix: “One surely does not need to be familiar in detail with the ‘system’ to undergo the poem. [C]orresponding to the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet,” there is “a word for an object, for an abstraction, for a proper name; in short, a ‘signifier.’” In addition to this there is “a transposition code, where the substitution code is subjected to a further process under which each signifier is changed systematically [...] the signifier for the letter ‘A’ in one section is substituted for the letter ‘B’ in the next.”

“The structure facilitates the invocation of connections between these things, beings, and notions, but also to interrupt the flow of thought or narrative that may have been developing at any given point and to allow for, as it were, thaumaturgic transformations at practically all levels of structure.”¹

Thaumaturgic transformations wherein positively every particulate performs a metonymic function,² vide this cameo from pg.11:

¹ The phrases these coded letters spell out, the burning letters in a Kabbalist's God-name!

² Meaning the members of said encoded alphabet, “which I imagine as wildly heterological metonyms to display the emergence of all that comes to Appear.”

There Where You Do Not Think To Be Thinking

No stability licit
but that it
reflect Black Lake.

Hammerhead's aflame
with his own Volatility.

He likes it.

Not illicit, He.

Yet Hammerhead hammers on
with distracted Presence,
Black Lake but a blur to Hammerhead;
Volatility a metaphysical conundrum
fascinating to Hammerhead.

Or Hammerhead, later, pg. 46:

Hammerhead rattled his Aftermath,
wretched, and scattered his spittle,
assembled the little darts
he'd collected in his wrists
in the twilight,
roamed through the tents.

And the people sickened
and the people healed.

The hammerheads sat in a broken circle
discussing assaults and abuses.

Hammerhead sang and sucked,
gurgled and wretched
across the jungle tangle.
Hammerhead sang and sucked.

And the people sickened
and the people healed.

Such were the avatars of Hammerhead
arrayed across Soul Valley,

tornadoes swirling leftward,
swirling right,

over a single point.

Stein gives us tools not toys, a distinction much in need, these days, of reification. This poem is an answer for how to deal with it all: its sense of the particular is not as datum but as something intimate with (one of the poem's coding "signifiers") Happenstance—

Happenstance is, perhaps,
inalienably Volatile
but metastable;
and if you take into account its higher register,
functionally Ubiquitous.
It doesn't become something else:
it is already, at every point and nexus,
precisely by virtue of being only *here*,
indomitably Elsewhere.
(p.181)

– and as such Stein presents us, by the ruse of its apparency, with the actual. This is effectively an assertion: subjects are mediated by objects. *The act of Stein's scrying is a metempsychosis through a plurality of worlds and their eternity*³, divulging fragile ontologies along with their discovery. Is this not why they burned Giordano Bruno alive one February day in 1600?

Incomprehensibility
tautologically
fails to comprehend
its own incomprehensibility.

Such matters
batter
Hammerhead
and set him obsessing about Crystal.

“How can I work my Opal?” he worries.
“It's all a Black Box to me.
But to hell with the Incomprehensible.
My business is with this Nation
and the rapid degeneration of Happenstance,
oblique to its own Syzygy.

Now,

[...] (p.260)

For another view: any given vantage occludes another (C.S. will verify this in conversation). Yet all the vantages are here, are in–formation: a most heretical double-axe of anagogy that is the un-clothed being of a thaumaturgical need.

“He who is truly a musician [] by nature, not only producing harmony in song but also providing the rhythm of the music appropriate to each instrument, this tireless musician is god, for it does not befit god to tire.”⁴

It is as if such a god and Stein's creatures form a syzygetical if problematical communion by means of this poem, in the sense (among others) that the god called Language– “who else could know so much”⁵–

³ I borrow the language in italics from Luigi Firpo's lists charging Bruno by the Roman Inquisition.

⁴ –Pg. 63, *Corpus Hermeticum*, trans. Brian P. Copenhaver, (Cambridge University Press:NY; 1992)

⁵ Robert Kelly, from somewhere in Shame, with *Birgit Kempker* (McPhearson)

There Where You Do Not Think To Be Thinking

is clothed in language. This is the way Stein (apparently) views the emergence of his bare “being”: “functionally ubiquitous/indomitably Elsewhere.”

The magical disposition considers desires and wants and needs as the root of an ontology; before the down-peerings of ideology: and *views* their shifting manifestations because that’s precisely what appearance is, and Stein gives it to you: “information” qua ontology is not IT, “it is reality that solicits the meaning of poetry, not the other way round. Reality subsumes the very intuitions that it fosters, projecting itself– and the writer and reader together–onto an intransitive itinerary of pondering, the exit from which can only be — Discovery Itself.” (Blurb again.)

The incomparable nature of this work– in that it is like absolutely everything– makes writing even directly about it seem a part of it, as if I had somehow been subsumed into Tornado Island. Oh my god– this is one of the few poems I would call absolutely vital.

Tamas Panitz
6/9/15
Hudson NY

My Friend Robert Ashley

Tom Johnson

In 1978, I was looking for a theater where I could launch some new chamber operas and Bob was also looking for a place where he could present his “talking band”. So, I remember meeting with him a couple of times to go around to look for theaters together that we could rent to do our projects. We talked quite a bit around this time and one of the subjects was how to do music without writing it down on paper. Somehow, if we continued doing that, we’d just be continuing to make music the way our teachers had and composers for centuries have and we had to find another way to do it if we wanted to find our own music that was something new.

One aspect of this, of course, was to use our heads instead of our paper and try to memorize things. Just think of something, learn it, do it, memorize it until it was locked into our head and we could do it the same every time (that’s, by the way, the way most rock groups work). We had classical backgrounds and didn’t know how to do that. I started working that way with logical sequences, these were the things that I could remember and rehearse and just do them without writing things down on paper. For Bob, getting away from traditional notation was important because he wanted to work with the talking voice, which has so many innuendos that it can never be written down with any accuracy. That’s why he needed the recording studio. He needed to explore recording, cutting, and mixing and lots of other things that you can’t put down on music paper.

What also came up often as we were looking around for theaters was the subject ‘opera’. Bob never went to the Met and never had an interest in The Marriage of Figaro and operatic sopranos, but he liked the term because ‘opera’ just means ‘opus’ or ‘work’ and why not do an opera for talking instead?

Well, we never quite agreed on that, so I continued writing “real” bel canto operas like “The Four Note Opera” and “Riemannoper.”

[www.editions75.com: “music by my friends”]

Remembering Robert Ashley

Pauline Oliveros

Robert Ashley was a faithful correspondent in the early sixties to Ramon Sender Barayon at the San Francisco Tape Music Center. Ashley's music was programmed often at SFTMC. In 1964 the SFTMC on Tour arrived in Mt. Pleasant Michigan and met with a contingent from the Once Group from Ann Arbor that included Bob.

Our tour group included myself, Ramon Sender Barayon, Morton Subotnik, Anthony Martin and William R. Maginnis Jr.

The Once group members that I remember who came to meet us in Mt. Pleasant were, Bob Ashley, Gordon Mumma, Anne Opie Wehrer, George Manupelli and several others.

After our concert we traveled to Ann Arbor to stay with members of the Once Group and this was how I came to know Bob Ashley.

Our friendship solidified over the years with occasions such as the making of the film by George Manupelli of Dr. Chicago featuring Alvin Lucier as Dr. Chicago with sound by Bob.

We were on location in Joshua Tree National Monument, the high desert, in a wonderful encampment with a couple of large trailers and individual tents. There was much humor and late night gatherings with the cast.

I heard several performances of Wolfman in the 60s and wrote about it in my Source Magazine article "Some Sound Observations".

I quote:

"Three days ago at UC Davis, I experienced a performance of Bob Ashley's Wolfman. My ears changed and adapted themselves to the sound pressure level. All the wax in my ears melted. After the performance, ordinary conversation at two feet away sounded very distant. Later, all ordinary sounds seemed heightened, much louder than usual. Today I can still feel Wolfman in my ears. MY EARS FEEL LIKE CAVES. Monday I am going to hear Wolfman again. It will be the fourth time I've heard Wolfman, and I can't wait to hear the feed back dripping from his jaws again."

Bob came to UCSD in the 70s with the Once Group to present The Trial of Ann Opie Wehrer for Crimes Against Humanity. This was another opportunity to converse and get to know Bob's amazing performance art.

We met again in Minneapolis when the Once Group performed Kitty Hawk at the Walker Art Center.

Bob asked me to be the first interviewee for his Music with Roots in the Aether. The idea being a regular interview then a performance both to be filmed for a series with several composers. I suggested that I would like to do my interview as a theater piece. This happened at Mills College. All of the rest of the ensuing interviews then had a theatrical aspect that Bob handled so excellently.

Bob, the Once Group and the San Francisco Tape Music Center were central to the community of experimental composers and performers that developed throughout the 60s and spawned New Music America from 1980 to 1991.

Interesting that I was the first director of the Tape Music Center at Mills (1966) and then Bob became the director and renamed the TMC as Center for Contemporary Music (CCM) as it is known today.

All our early collaborations from exchanging tapes via snail mail to actual encounters and performances have created a long trail of history with Bob as a central figure and friend.

My last encounter with Bob was at Roulette in New York at a concert. It was December 2013. He was with wife Mimi Johnson. I was shocked to see my friend looking so fragile and felt that this might be our last meeting. It was.

I am writing this with great appreciation for the life of a great spirit and innovator in music. I am very happy for the many memories of his earlier work as well as his operas.

Personal Lives – In the Home of Robert Ashley

Aaron Siegel

I studied percussion with the same teacher for 10 years as a young musician and learned many important things. But none of the technical challenges of playing an instrument impacted on me as an artist as much as the first time I visited my teacher's home. I went there with several of my fellow students and afterwards there was much discussion of the cool instruments and the record collection. But what impressed me most was that I had seen what an artist's life was like up close. And it wasn't as scary as I thought it would be. I reflected on this feeling after having learned of the death of Robert Ashley last night, and it occurred to me that, despite my relatively limited interaction with Bob, he had confirmed some of these same ideas. Bob was a walking embodiment of his work—thoughtful, sharp, digressive and funny. And from my point of view, he lived his art with dedicated flair of purpose and exploration.

I have always been an admirer of Bob's work. I remember the first time I happened upon *Perfect Lives* in the university library and was awestruck at his strange vision of the world. Especially amidst the structured environment of a music conservatory, his articulation of a warped world, floating right there in the middle of consciousness, but somehow still inviting, was a revelation. I learned more about Bob's work as a student of Alvin Lucier, and the stories of their musical adventures together formed a foundation for some of the collective work I have made a big part of my life as an artist.

But I got the full 'Bob' experience when I was asked to be one of the performers in a re-staging of his classic work 'That Morning Thing' at the Kitchen in 2012. The performances were odd and sublime, and the group of people involved will be friends for a long time to come. But what will stick with me is walking for the first time into Bob and Mimi's loft on Beach Street in Tribeca. This was a loft like the ones that have been written about in the history books about experimental music in the 70's—large, industrial and somehow reeking of the kind of independent determination that has shaped the last 50 years of American music. In the 'studio' there were large cabinets full of scores and special equipment for various pieces, there was inspiring art on the walls, a small kitchen, rows of microphone stands and in the middle of the room a tent set up with a mixing board and recording equipment. The living area of the building, on a different floor was similarly elegant, art from peers and family lining the walls, a well-used easy chair and an inspired warmth that said 'come right in, we have nothing to hide.'

Bob invited all of the performers in, and in the last years of his life seemed to embrace the reality that his work has had a huge impact on a younger generation of artists. For me, the impact is musical and personal. I know that he was a complicated person, but he also was a walking lesson in how to keep your work close to you, how to tell stories that resonate from within with the confidence that they too will resonate with others. It takes courage and a certain amount of hard-headedness to live the kind of life that Bob did. I, for one, am deeply grateful for my brief encounters with the man.

Indonesian Influences in the Music of Elaine Barkin

John O. Robison

Conferences can be wonderful opportunities for meeting interesting people, and this certainly happened to me in the Spring of 1998, when I met Elaine Barkin at a conference on intercultural music in London. I was fascinated with her work, since here was an American woman composer who had developed an interest in both Balinese and Javanese gamelan traditions. At that particular conference, everything was focusing upon the Balinese tradition: Elaine gave a wonderful presentation on her compositional collaboration with world-renowned Balinese musician Nyoman Wenten. In addition, I had been asked to play Elaine's *Legong Dreams* for solo oboe on my concert, a piece in which Balinese gamelan motives are combined with Western chromaticism and irregular meters.

I remember leaving this conference in London quite fascinated with Barkin and her Indonesian-inspired music. She was educated at Queens College and Brandeis University, and her progressive, Western-tradition creations include music for solo instruments, chamber ensembles, orchestra, voice, musical theater, tape collages, graphic scores, wind ensemble, improvisers, and computer-driven midi. For several decades she was editorially associated with *Perspectives of New Music*, a co-founder with Benjamin Boretz and J. K. Randall of Open Space Music in 1988, and in the 1990s, with Lydia Hamessley, she co-edited the book *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity and Music*. Barkin was composition professor at UCLA from 1974 to 1997. The transition from the northeastern United States to southern California had a significant impact upon her life. With one of the strongest ethnomusicology programs in North America, and an emphasis on South East Asian music, UCLA proved to be a fertile environment for her to eventually turn towards new sound possibilities.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Barkin became particularly interested in collaborative endeavors and interactive music-making, inspiring her to form UCLA's Experimental Workshop. She joined UCLA's Indonesian gamelan ensembles in 1987 studying Javanese gamelan with UCLA professor Sue Carole DeVale and Balinese gamelan with I Nyoman Wenten as well as participating in the 1988 UCLA Asian Performing Arts Summer Institute with Wayan Suweca, Balinese master drummer. Barkin and Suweca team-taught a class in which the participants improvised and collectively composed several works involving the UCLA Balinese gamelan ensemble. Between 1989 and 1997, Barkin made five trips to Bali to study new music for gamelan. The main purpose of the trips was to establish a dialogue with Balinese composers of what they then called "new music," thus exploring all of the opportunities for composers interested in writing intercultural music drawing upon both Western and Indonesian resources. This new interest in Indonesian gamelan provided the stimulus for some of her finest compositions. Out of Barkin's sixty major works, nine of them involve Indonesian instruments or are inspired by Indonesian music, all of them composed between 1988 and 2005:

Encore for Javanese gamelan, 1988: Barkin describes this as a significant departure from traditional gamelan practice at the time, since it does not use a specific mode, has the gongs playing on the offbeats, and mixes specified music with improvisation.

Legong Dreams for solo oboe, 1990: Although written for the oboe, this solo work uses melodic and rhythmic ideas taken from one of the most famous Balinese dances, *Legong Kraton*.

Kotekan Jam for Balinese gamelan, 1991: This was mostly a text piece with improvisation written for the University of Oregon's Pacific Rim Balinese ensemble.

Gamelange for Western harp and mixed gamelan, 1992-93: One of her most successfully integrated intercultural works.

Touching all bases/di mana-mana for electronic double bass, midi-percussion, and Balinese gamelan, 1995-96: This was composed in collaboration with I Nyoman Wenten, with the support of a Meet the Composer commission.

Lagu Kapal Kuning for Balinese gamelan angklung, 1996 (four-tone version) and 1997 (five-tone version): This uses musical ideas taken from **the** Beatles song, *Yellow Submarine*.

Warna/Colors for mixed Balinese and Javanese gamelan, midi, 2003.

Faygele's Footsteps for midi dulcimer, sitar, gamelan, harp and piano, 2005.

Inti Sari for gamelan angklung, 2005: Written for the gamelan angklung ensemble at Loyola Marymount University.

In Autumn 1996, Barkin taught in a Semester at Sea program, teaching a beginning *gamelan angklung* ensemble as a part of this experience. The Balinese *gamelan angklung*, which has a lighter sound than other gamelan ensembles, generally uses a sequence of four pitches --- G, A, B and D --- that are derived from the five-tone *slendro* scale. The core of the *gamelan angklung* ensemble is the set of four-keyed metallophones, known collectively as the *gangsa*, that are shown in Figure 1; the jegogan is the lowest one, the pemade is the middle-range instrument, while the kantilan is the highest-pitched metallophone. The instruments that complete the ensemble are the small kempur gong, some large gongs, and the set of eight brass pots known as the reyong, which provide two octaves of the four-note scale and require four players, which each person responsible for playing two of the instruments.

Figure 1. Gamelan angklung, gangsa instruments.



Jegogan



Pemade



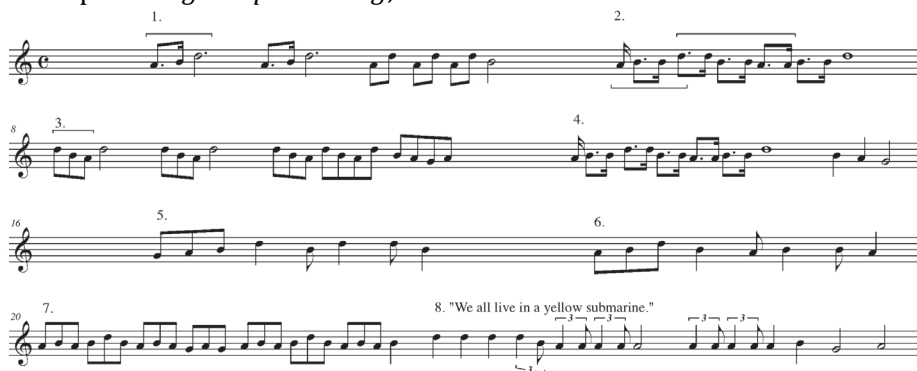
Kantilan

Figure 2. Additional gamelan angklung instruments.



While Barkin's original version of *Lagu Kapal Kuning* was for the typical four-tone *angklung* ensemble, she revised it the next year for the more unusual *angklung* ensemble using a five-tone scale which takes the previously mentioned pitches and adds the pitch E. And since the original version of her composition *Lagu Kapal Kuning* (which means "Song of the Yellow Boat") was written while she was traveling and teaching at sea, Barkin came up with the idea of using melodic and rhythmic materials from Paul McCartney's 1966 *Yellow Submarine*. While the original Beatles melody uses a five-note pentatonic scale (G---A---B---D---E), Barkin avoided any references to the fifth pitch E in her original four-tone version. (Any and all references to pitch ought to be understood as approximate since Balinese and Javanese gamelan ensembles are not tuned according to any standardized or well-tempered tuning system, e.g., octaves are not 2:1, tones can be flatted or sharpened according to the mind-set of the gongmaker.)

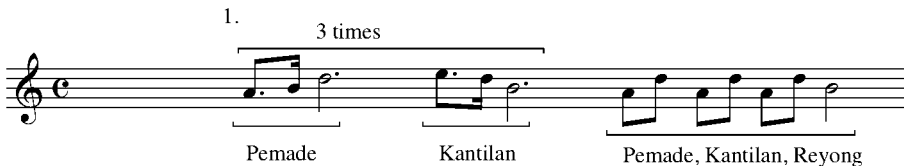
In the four-note version of this *gamelan angklung* composition, the first four melodic ideas shown in Example 1 are all based on the opening measure of the Beatles song, particularly the outline of the fourth from A---D and the descent from D---B---A rather like a deconstruction of the Beatles tune. The fifth and sixth melodic ideas shown in the example bring in a syncopated rhythm that is one part of a more complicated interlocking rhythmic pattern known as *kotekan*, and the seventh melodic idea also represents only one portion of two simultaneous parts. For the concluding eighth phrase of the composition, Barkin states verbatim the final portion of the Beatles song ("We all live in a yellow submarine"), with the only change being softening the dotted rhythms to gentler triplet figures.

Example 1. *Lagu Kapal Kuning*, main melodic ideas from the four-tone version.

The following year, Barkin revised and expanded *Lagu Kapal Kuning* into a composition for a more advanced *angklung* ensemble, premiered by Professor Paul Humphreys and his gamelan

group at Loyola Marymount University. This lengthier version is written for the more unusual 5-tone *gamelan angklung*, whose pitches approximate G-A-B-D-E. In this first excerpt from the five-tone version of her composition, Barkin expands the opening phrase: The piece begins with a *buka* introduction for the reyong, and after the drum interlude, the rising figure from A-B-D in the pemade is balanced by the kantilan answering with a descending figure on E-D-B that incorporates the new fifth note of the *slendro* scale. After the pemade and kantilan do this dialogue several times, the pemade, kantilan, and reyong join together for the phrase emphasizing the pitches A to D.

Example 2. *Lagu Kapal Kuning*, opening of the five-tone version.



The next section expands upon the second phrase of the original four-tone version by including the fifth tone, E, and also by alternating instruments --- pemade plus reyong, then kantilan plus reyong, and then after a tutti phrase, quick dialogues between pemade and other instruments.

Example 3. *Lagu Kapal Kuning*, section 2 of the five-tone version.



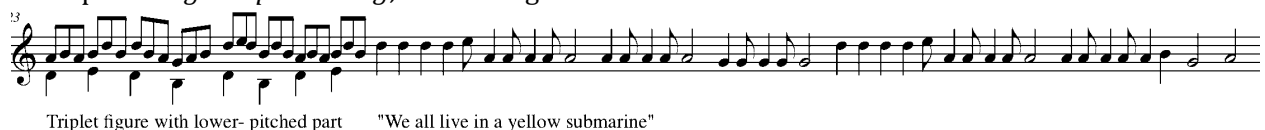
The third section of the five-tone *Lagu Kapal Kuning* departs even further from the original four-tone version, repeating the D-B-A while the instruments become more independent of one another, coming in progressively at more random time intervals. The fourth section focuses on *kotekan* patterns similar to the ones found in the earlier version of the composition, but since this version was written for a more advanced ensemble the *kotekan* is far more complex.

Example 4. *Lagu Kapal Kuning*, section 3 of the five-tone version.



In the concluding portion of *Lagu Kapal Kuning*, Barkin returns to the last two phrases of her original piece, but with some significant differences: The triplet figure is now supported by the lower-pitched instruments playing slower melodic/rhythmic patterns, while the refrain phrase from the original Beatles song is much livelier due to the full ensemble combined with intricate drum patterns.

Example 5. *Lagu Kapal Kuning*, concluding section of the five-tone version.



In 1994, Barkin and Pak I Nyoman Wenten received a commission from the Basso Bongo duo, consisting of Robert Black on electronic contrabass and Amy Knoles on midi-percussion, to collaborate on a composition for them with Balinese gamelan. A faculty member at the California Institute of the Arts since 1973, Wenten became the director of the UCLA Balinese gamelan in 1988. One of the first things that they struggled with was the differences between their compositional processes and conceptual models of a piece: For Wenten, ideas could evolve and undergo revision until the final rehearsal, while Barkin's approach is more of a Western compositional process:

Wenten: "When I start to compose, first I'm thinking about the name, about a theme . . . then I aim to have correlation between the name and the piece, I try to bring this particular feeling to the music, which a Balinese audience can probably hear . . . When I bring my ideas to the players we try them out . . . and after each rehearsal the piece gets more refined . . . we make it more definite each time."

Barkin: "I usually regard a composition as a product of my struggle to discover who I am in the world, as a way for the past and present to meet, as a way to bring order into my otherwise fragmented and disordered being, to illuminate fantasy and invent an illusion of reality. I make sketches, devise schemes to follow, improvise, accept accidents, and occasionally think about ideal listeners. . .

Completed in September of 1996, Barkin and Wenten called their collaborative composition *touching all bases/di mana mana*, and its premiere performance took place at California Institute of the Arts in April 1998. Ultimately, Barkin said that she had not been entirely satisfied with the piece, stating that the two contradictory worlds that she and Wenten lived in co-existed, but were never truly integrated. The composition is organized into three sections, featuring in turn the Western soloists, the Balinese ensemble, and finally the entire group. The opening section of the composition features dark, chromatic bass glissandos, intense unmetered melodies, and occasional outbursts from the Balinese kantilans, pemades, and calung. Wenten composed the middle section of the work, which switches to the energetic and tuneful *kebyar* style of playing, along with explosive changes in tempo and dynamics. The concluding section effectively reveals Wenten's and Barkin's distinct styles: Beginning with an energetic gamelan passage, there is then a reprise of the dark sounding bass part from the opening, along with colorful midi-percussion. After this there is a brief return to the *kebyar* style before the full group concludes with loud, percussive sonorities.¹

Legong Dreams for solo oboe (1990) is intimately connected with the Balinese dance form known as *legong*, along with Barkin's desire to create a new work that incorporated some extended playing techniques for the oboe. Of added significance is the fact that it is her only Indonesian-based work that does not use any gamelan instruments, but transfers what she had learned to a solo Western instrument. At the time Barkin was learning perhaps the most famous *legong* dance music, *Legong Kraton*, in UCLA's Balinese Gong Kebyar gamelan ensemble. She said that as much as she tried, she could not get the music out of her head, and that it occupied her mind for months no matter what she was doing --- driving, working, or dreaming. While *Legong Dreams* was an effort to exorcise the *legong* music from her subconscious, she soon discovered that the experience of having such melodies permeate a person's life while they are learning a new piece is well understood to Balinese musicians, who refer to it as "getting inside" the music.

¹ The *touching all bases/di mana mana* score serves as a guide to the performers, but does not make sense to the general reader, which is why no musical examples are included; the work can only be appreciated by listening to the sonorities that Barkin and Wenten created.

Figure 3. Elaine Barkin with I Nyoman Wenten in Sading, Bali, 1990.



The Gamelan Gong Kebyar tuning for this Balinese dance is five-tone pelog — D-Eb-F-A-Bb — and Example 6 shows the core melody, along with one of its elaboration parts below (the one that Barkin remembers learning). Two of the most distinctive features of the core melody are the neighbor tones from A-Bb-A leading to the descent to F-Eb, followed by the upward movement from the neighbor tone figure Bb-A-Bb up to D, and this sequence of pitches is also followed in the heavily syncopated elaboration *polos* part that Barkin learned in the gamelan ensemble.

Example 6. Legong Kraton, traditional core melody with one elaboration part.



The opening phrases are devoted exclusively to the first two pitches of the core melody, A and Bb, while the second line of the score is inspired by the syncopated elaboration part found in the *Legong Kraton* music. Even the fast, irregular patterns found in the third line of the score contain the melodic core of A-Bb-A-F-Eb. After this point, as the oboe part becomes more disjunct, chromatic and developmental, there is less obvious connection with the Balinese dance music, although motives from it can still be heard.

Example 7. *Legong Dreams*, opening phrases relying on motives from the *Legong Kraton* melody.

The musical score consists of three staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. It starts with a melodic phrase marked *mf*. A bracket labeled "Change color" spans the first two measures. The second staff continues the melody, marked *f*, and includes the instruction "Poco a poco dim." followed by a triplets of eighth notes marked *ppp*. The third staff starts with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp, and a 4/4 time signature. It begins with a melodic phrase marked *f* and "Fast, irregular", followed by a series of sixteenth notes.

In 1992, having acquired substantial experience in both the Balinese and Javanese gamelan traditions, Barkin began the challenging and innovative task of composing a work for the Western concert harp and small mixed gamelan ensemble. The composition, entitled *Gamélange*, was first performed at UCLA on May 12th and then on June 5th of 1993. The title is a combination of the words gamelan and *mélange* (mixture), which describes the piece perfectly. It is a true multicultural work on several levels, since it combines the Western harp with Indonesian instruments, Balinese with Javanese instruments, one five-tone, two different seven-tone and twelve-tone scales. The eight-person gamelan ensemble includes three Balinese metallophones, three Javanese metallophones, assorted cymbals and drums, and folk/toy instruments. The Balinese instruments are the *kantilan*, *calung*, *ceng-ceng*, *kempli*, and *bedug*, while the Javanese instruments include the *kempur* and *kemong* gongs, the *bonang panerus*, *saron*, and *slentem*. The *saron* and *slentem* are represented in both *slendro* and *pelog*.

The solo harp part was written exclusively for Dr. Sue Carole DeVale, ethnomusicologist who at that time was the Indonesian specialist on the faculty at UCLA, and who also was Barkin's first Javanese gamelan teacher. Barkin explains that her first task was to work closely with DeVale and her harp to fully understand the capabilities of the instrument, various possible tunings, mixtures of diatonic and chromatic writing, types of glissandos and percussive attacks, extended techniques such as preparing the strings with aluminum foil, and what sort of pedaling would be possible with a mixed group of Balinese and Javanese instruments. Barkin then worked on a weekly basis with the gamelan performers, all UCLA ethnomusicology students who have gone on to have prominent careers. Meeting one or two times per week to experiment with all of the sound possibilities, she points out that the mixture of different scales and instruments from varied traditions was innovative and unique in the early 1990s, although some Hindu-Balinese temple ceremonies are likely to have several ensembles playing simultaneously.

The two performances of *Gamélange* at UCLA during the Spring of 1993 took place in different contexts, at a faculty composers concert (May 12th) and then at an Indonesian gamelan concert (June 5th). Barkin states that her "Indonesian colleagues remarked on its deviations from traditional norms, performance techniques, its apparent knowledge and respect for those traditions, yet clearly a work not composed by an Indonesian." The performance techniques are certainly unorthodox, as indicated in Barkin's notes for *Gamélange*: All players use two mallets during certain sections, with the *calung* player instructed to use one standard *calung* mallet and one "other" mallet, while the gong player is required to use in addition to the typical padded gong mallet either the wooden handle of the mallet or a wooden-headed mallet. The Javanese players at times

also use either the handle of their standard mallet or any other percussion mallet. At one point the kempli player circularly scrapes the instrument to achieve a ringing tone similar to a Tibetan bowl, and in several places the players intermittently tap the wooden body or stand of their instruments (or shake a small wooden rattle).

In *Gamélange* Barkin utilizes both five and seven-note scales (*slendro* and *pelog* respectively), one from Bali and two from Java. The Balinese scale is the five-tone core version of the standard seven-note scale, while the Javanese instruments use five-note (*slendro*) and two seven-note (*pelog*) scale forms. Through her experiences with playing the UCLA Balinese and Javanese instruments, Barkin discovered that these instruments had certain tones in common, which is one of the main reasons why *Gamélange* worked as a cohesive composition with this particular set of instruments. Collectively, the three scales use a total of nine different pitches; of these, two pitches are common to all of the scales (Eb, Bb), while four pitches are found in two of the scales (D, F, G#/Ab, and A); only the pitches Db, Gb, and C are found in one of the three Indonesian scales. This means that there are three pitches that are unavailable to the gamelan, and are unique to the harp --- E, G and B.

The arrangement of the instrumentalists on the stage was designed to mix the three groups --- Balinese, Javanese, and harp. Facing the stage, on the far left was David Martinelli playing the bonang panerus using *slendro* tuning, and next to him was Michael Bakan, who conducted and played on several Balinese instruments utilizing extended techniques (ceng-ceng, kempli, and bedug). Moving from left to right as one faces the stage, next was harp soloist Sue Carole DeVale. Towards the middle of the stage were two performers playing Javanese instruments in both scale formats, Wanda Bryant on the sarons and Alice Hunt on the slentems; in both cases the instrument on their left used the five-note scale, with the instrument played with their right hand used the seven-note scale. Slightly to the back the next performer was Jay Keister on the Balinese calung, next to whom were two Balinese kantan players — Lindsay Clare on the lower kantan, and Grace M on the higher one. At the far right as one faces the stage was Elaine Barkin, who played kempur and kemong gongs.

Java	Bali		Java	Java	Bali	Bali	Bali
	JavaBali						
Martinelli	Bakan	DeVale	Bryant	Hunt	Keister	Clare	Grace M
	Barkin						
bonang	ceng-ceng	harp	pelog saron	pelog slentem	calung	kantan	kantan
	kempur						
panerus		kempli	slendro saron	slendro slentem			
(lower)	(higher)	kemong					
	bedug						

The opening section of *Gamélange* begins with tremolos in all eight gamelan instruments, while the harp, prepared with heavy aluminum foil, creates unusual sonorities and enters with percussive slaps in its lower registers. After a wide-ranging glissando, the harp does chromatic pedal glides in the low register, scraping the strings with an aluminum tuning fork.

Example 8. *Gamelange*, section 1.

Balinese pelog (kantilans, calung, gong, ceng-ceng)

Javanese slendro (bonang)

Javanese pelog (saron)

Javanese slendro (slentem)

Harp

lowest slap

midrange

low

lowest

ffz

ffz

ff

ff

f

Wide-ranging Pedal glides (slow and glissando (right buzzy; repeated) after gamelan)

Scrape down with aluminum tuning fork

After this, in the continuation of section one, the slow-moving, wide-ranging harp solo is punctuated by occasional entrances in the Javanese instruments (bonang, saron, and slentem), utilizing both *slendro* and *pelog* scale forms, but with instructions for each of the performers to play any two pitches within this framework, and using two mallets. After the harp's slow, chromatic double pedal glides and buzzy tremolos in the lower register of the instrument, the Balinese instruments enter with unsynchronized improvisation that complements the extended harp techniques (using tuning forks to play wide-ranging glissandos, and then to slowly scrape up the length of selected strings).

Example 9. *Gamelange*, continuation of section 1.

BALI

IMPROVISE OUT OF SYNC, NOT TOO FAST

UNTIL YOU HEAR THE GLISS: STOP

AT END OF GLISS:

GLISS

JAVA

REMOVE FOIL

PICK UP TUNING FORKS, one in each hand.

UNEVEN GLISSES (catch)

SLOW

MEDIUM

fast

(PUT FORKS DOWN)

Harp

REMOVE FOIL

PICK UP TUNING FORKS, one in each hand.

UNEVEN GLISSES (catch)

SLOW

MEDIUM

fast

(PUT FORKS DOWN)

A fixed rhythm is not apparent until the second section of *Gamelange*, which begins with the small kajar gong setting a steady triple meter. Soon several layers of activity are added --- first the calung with a small gong, then the first kantilan with its *polos* and then a syncopated *sangsih* part in

the second *kantilan*. These interlocking syncopated rhythmic patterns are somewhat influenced by American ragtime in addition to Balinese rhythms. After several statements of these interlocking patterns, the harp enters with a passage that relies primarily on six pitches taken from the Javanese *pelog* scale (with the exception of G#/Ab), along with an occasional pitch taken from Javanese *slendro* (F#/Gb) and the pitch G, which is one of the pitches unique to the harp. Towards the conclusion of this excerpt, Barkin inserts a chromaticized version of Pak Cokro's *Widyasmoro* melody before the gamelan enters again.

Example 10. *Gamélange*, section 2.

The musical score for Example 10, section 2 of *Gamélange*, is written in 3/4 time. It consists of five staves. The top staff, labeled 'kajar', shows a series of 'x' marks representing rhythmic tapping. The second staff, labeled 'calung', contains a melodic line with notes and rests. The third staff, labeled 'kantilan 1 (polos)', and the fourth staff, labeled 'kantilan 2 (sangsih)', both feature complex, interlocking rhythmic patterns. The bottom staff, labeled 'harp', contains a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes and a 'uneven glissando' indicated by a wavy line. The score is divided into two systems, with the second system beginning at measure 5. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

As *Gamélange* evolves, Barkin introduces additional interlocking patterns in both the Balinese and Javanese instruments during the third section. Lines 19-21 of the score feature the solo harp playing angular lines that rely mostly on pitches taken from the three Indonesian scales, with an occasional G or B unique to the harp; Barkin indicates that the calung and slentem can play intermittently and softly in the background, with other gamelan players lightly tapping wooden parts of their instruments and occasionally strumming the dulcimer-like *arpa magica*. As the harp's solo passage turns into low, gong-like slaps played with a pair of tuning forks, the music becomes even more multicultural; mixed gamelan enters with the kajar and calung establishing a six-beat rhythmic cycle. Over this rhythmic framework competing interlocking rhythmic patterns are

introduced, with *polos* and *sangsih* played first by the Javanese instruments, and then a different interlocking Balinese pattern that joins the ensemble after several rhythmic cycles. After the harp ceases the loud gong-like slaps and pauses for at least one cycle, it then enters with a sixteenth-note passage derived from the Balinese tune *Puspawarna*, and uses a complex pedaling alteration created by Barkin and DeVale that allows the harp to switch between four notes each of the *slendro* and *pelog* scales.

Example 11. *Gamélange*, section

The musical score for Example 11, section of *Gamélange*, is presented in a multi-staff format. The top staff is for the harp, which includes a diagram of a complex pedaling alteration involving ascending glissandos in the right hand (RH) and descending in the left hand (LH). Below the harp staff are five staves for the gamelan ensemble: Calung, Kajar, Bonang (polos), Saron (sangsih), and Kantilan (polos) and Kantilan (sangsih). The score is in 9/8 time and features a variety of rhythmic patterns and melodic lines, including sixteenth-note passages and gong-like slaps.

In the fourth section Barkin asks the performers to play in a “somewhat spacey” style, as if they are tuning up, and the ensemble is required to focus on pitches that are common between at least two of the Indonesian scales. Some extended techniques are used in the gamelan, since the gong player scrapes the instrument while others perform with soft mallets or flip a mallet to play with the handles, with no fast moves, and paying close attention to one another. Only the pitches common to all instruments are used, and the harp plays single tones, harmonics, and tremolos in any order. A change in the harp pedaling is the cue for the gamelan to drop out as the harp begins playing a registrally disjunct solo.

In the fifth and final section of *Gamélange*, after the harp introduces conflicting triads spaced a minor or major second apart, the full ensemble brings the work to a rousing conclusion, with loud slaps in the harp and all three scale forms --- Javanese pelog, Javanese slendro, and five-tone Balinese pelog --- being equally represented by the mixed Indonesian instruments. While the result technically produces some obvious dissonances between the parts, they are totally appropriate and contribute to the wonderfully shimmering array of gamelan and harp sonorities that Barkin creates.

Example 12. *Gamélange*, section 5.

Kantilan

Kantilan

Calung

Bonang (slendro)

Saron (pelog)

Slentem (slendro)

Harp

Loud slaps

[Repeat this measure 6 more times, increasing from ff to ffff.]

Five years later, for her presentation at the 1998 CIMA (Centre for Intercultural Music Arts) International Symposium in London, Barkin had this insightful reflection about one of her most innovative works:

As I think back, recollect the entire experience, and as I listen to *Gamélange* nowadays, I experience more than just what the sounds sound like and how they are coming and going. My experience of the work as a listener is thick with its genesis and the creative and communal spirit which went into its preparation. For me it is more than a composition for harp and mixed gamelan. If it can be said to express anything *Gamélange* certainly expresses my infatuation with Indonesian gamelan, my affinity for ‘modern music’, my interests in collaboration and the effects and desirability of the co-existence of dissimilarities.

Gamélange is the most outstanding of Barkin’s nine Indonesian-inspired compositions. The idea of combining Balinese with Javanese instruments with the Western harp, while utilizing three different Indonesian scales along with unrestricted pitch content in the harp, is an experiment that I believe is still unique more than two decades after its composition. And while it does show her love of both gamelan and contemporary Western music, it is the way that Barkin celebrates the distinctive traits of each group and yet allows these distinct groups to work together that makes the piece so effective. In this respect, it is important to remember that the central reason for the success of *Gamélange* is that Barkin was able to create a certain amount of cohesiveness once she discovered that the various gamelan instruments at UCLA had certain tones in common. In asking Barkin if she would be interested in having the work performed at another university, she said that “this would not be possible because every gamelan is different, and only the instruments at UCLA have the common pitches that would allow for the composition to be the way that she intended it to sound.” Even more so, “only a uniquely dedicated and committed group of players, as was the case in 1993, could pull it off.”

Several of the UCLA ethnomusicology students who performed in *Gamélange* have commented to this author on the significance of the composition, and in Barkin's influence upon them as a professor. Jay Keister, Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of Colorado, states that Barkin's experimental music workshops were one of his top three experiences during his career at UCLA, and that she is at the top of his list in terms of people who had a huge influence upon him. From her teaching he learned to listen to music and how to think about it, since she had the ability to encourage people to "get rid of the baggage" and to think freely in order to explore sound and relationships between sound. Barkin encouraged people to explore relationships with others in the experimental workshops, and after more than six years of this experience, *Gamélange* seemed to fit right in with what they had been doing.²

Michael Bakan, Professor of Ethnomusicology at Florida State University, has contributed some incredibly perceptive comments on the nature of *Gamélange*, how it relates to Barkin's emphasis in her teaching on free exploration, and how it has affected his own teaching more than two decades later:

It's great to watch this video after these many, many years. I had actually forgotten what a great piece "Gamelange" is; it's very evocative, and in the way it moves through its different episodes, moods, and atmospheres, it presents a rich imaginary landscape hovering betwixt and between Bali, Java, and some other-worldly domain all its own. Sue's [Sue Carole DeVale] performance is outstanding--very powerful and full of subtle touches and nuances that fundamentally guide the performance's progression through all of its different scenes and settings.

Elaine was a very important influence on me as both an ethnomusicologist and a composer. Indeed, looking back now, I realize that her great gift as a composer and a teacher was to let freedom and the inherent delights of simultaneous individual and collective explorations of untethered musical and intellectual possibility unfold within frameworks that ultimately rendered such free exploration coherent, cohesive, and structured. "Gamelange" does just that. There was so much room to move in different directions and to improvise in that piece, yet in the end, listening to it, it comes across as a work that is beautifully planned with rather clear and finite ends in mind. It hadn't occurred to me until watching the video that you sent me that this elusive balance of free and structured musicking is precisely what I have been aspiring to achieve in my recent work with the Artism Ensemble, a Tallahassee-based improv collective featuring children on the autism spectrum, their co-participant "non-musician" parents, and professional musicians of diverse musical background. Artism has developed a rather unique musical sound and approach over the three years of its existence to date (during which time we have been funded by the NEA), but I realize now that the pathway to that uniqueness was shaped more than I had realized by the way Elaine tempered and guided my thinking when I studied, collaborated, and even traveled a bit in Bali with her back in the 1990s.³

Wanda Bryant, saron player in *Gamélange* who was a professor at the California Institute of the Arts until her 2013 retirement, talks about the importance of Barkin and harpist Sue Carole DeVale as both her mentors and friends. While the improvisatory aspects of the composition were a new experience for her, she emphasizes how the collective experience of rehearsing and creating *Gamélange* opened her mind to new sound possibilities, the delight that the group took on experimenting with extended techniques, and the uniqueness of the experience in general:

From the fall of 1992 through the spring of 1993, I was involved with the creation and realization of Elaine Barkin's *Gamelange*. At that point in time, I was writing my dissertation in Ethnomusicology at UCLA (Ph.D. 1995). My academic focus had been on Indonesia and the Balkans.

² Summary of a Skype conversation with Jay Keister on July 24, 2013.

³ E-mail communication from Michael Bakan dated August 18th, 2013.

I had studied and performed with the UCLA gamelan ensembles (both Javanese and Balinese) since 1986. I played *sangsih* to Elaine's *polos* in I Nyomen Wenten's gamelan for a number of years. Elaine was one of my mentors, even though she came from outside the ethnomusicology department. She sat on my Masters committee and we became friends. . . .

The group was copacetic. I had studied Javanese gamelan, organology, and other topics with harpist Sue Carole DeVale. She also sat on my Masters committee. I considered her (and still do) a close friend and mentor. I had taken classes and played in ensembles with all the other performers; everyone was on good terms. We were up for the task that Elaine had set before us, although I believe that all the other members had had previous experience with this kind of music.

I remember feeling overwhelmed at our initial rehearsals. I had never performed from this kind of score before, wherein not everything was written down. A theoretical understanding does not necessarily translate into successful practical application! I had never participated in a serious improvisatory project like this. When the musical cacophony was swirling around me, and everyone else was improvising their own part while I was lost, I remember finding comfort in the fact that at least I understood how to play my *saron* (an instrument unknown to me just six years prior). When the sections in *Gamelange* are based on traditional Indonesian musical structures and patterns came around, I felt a significant sense of relief.

The experience for me was a unique one. Experimenting with extended techniques and playing what Elaine referred to as "toys" (non-conventional sound sources) was really great fun. It also challenged my ears to open even further, to accept intonations that were not only outside the Western tempered scale but were a combination of three tuning systems (western, Javanese, and Balinese). As I look back on the performance now, I can hardly make heads or tails of the score. So much of what we did was decided on the spot and never coherently written down. Thankfully, this wonderful collaboration was captured on video.⁴

While they represent only one aspect of Elaine Barkin's life and work as a composer, her Indonesian-inspired compositions reveal the impact that gamelan music made upon her beginning with the 1980s. Broadening her musical horizons in mid-life, her interest in Indonesia allowed her to learn from and collaborate with Indonesian musicians, to compose new music for gamelan ensembles, and to explore a new world of musical thought via a distinctive intercultural mixture of Western with Indonesian elements. Of particular significance is the fact that through her teaching and her gamelan experiments, she had a significant impact upon a number of former UCLA students who have risen to prominence within the ethnomusicology profession, even though she was a composition professor at UCLA. Her unique gamelan-inspired creations, with their emphasis on sound, improvisation, and multiculturalism, hold a special place in the world of new music written between c. 1990-2005.⁵

⁴ E-mail communication from Wanda Bryant dated August 5th, 2013.

⁵ *Legong Dreams* has been recorded by oboist Michael Kibbe on OS CD 16; the June 5th, 1993 performance of *Gamelange* can be heard on OS CD 12. Different versions of this paper have presented at several international conferences, each time with considerable interest in Barkin and her gamelan-inspired works: The *World Music Days: China meets Indonesia International Symposium* at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing (November 7-10, 2012), the College Music Society International Conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina (June 17-24, 2013), and the Eighth International Symposium of the Society for Asian Music at Ningbo University in Ningbo, China (January 9-12, 2015).

Recombinant Strategies: Orchestral Works of Elliott Sharp

Paula Matthusen

I. Introduction

Elliott Sharp's diverse range of musical output has been the fascination of musicians, critics, and inter-viewers. This wide range of work is as easily matched by the vast numbers of musicians with whom Sharp has collaborated (Zeena Parkins, Bachir Attar, Hubert Sumlin, and hundreds more), as well as the variety of venues in which his music is performed. This diversity in musical styles stems from a number of influences – being the son of an engineer, serving briefly as a DJ at a college radio station where he encountered a plethora of different musics, studying composition with LeJaren Hiller, Morton Feldman, Roswell Rudd, and ethnomusicology with Charles Keil, and also having a persistent curiosity in tuning systems and invented and prepared instruments. The opening statement of an interview with Sharp in *Bomb Magazine* exemplifies many of the reactions to his diversity of output: “*Elliott’s such a polymath it’s easy to forget entire strains of his career. He’s constantly working, playing, touring and composing, while in person he’s both relaxed and humble.*” [1]

The intensity of Sharp's output is due in part to his avid performance life as a multi-instrumentalist, often improvising in a variety of ensembles, a number of which – such as Orchestra Carbon and Terraplane – he directs himself. While many of the interviews and articles available on Sharp have focused on his algorithmic and improvisatory work and/or his creative output as a blues musician, nothing has yet been written analytically on his through-composed orchestral works, of which there are a growing number. This article engages specifically with Sharp's orchestral work and, in so doing, examines possible resonances between his wide range of musical practices. Sharp often refers to his compositions as “fixed” versions of his algorithmic and improvisatory compositions. What emerges in this process of transcribing an otherwise spontaneous performance? Sharp has frequently invoked metaphors of emergence, as well as chaos and complexity theories in his algorithmic, improvisatory pieces. Acknowledging this implies a challenge – how do we discuss a “simulation” of an otherwise improvisatory process, when the “sum” is always greater than the “parts”? Sharp's improvisatory ensemble pieces rely on the intricacies within an

ensemble, and encourage complex textures that emerge as a result of cajoling self-organizing behavior from the ensemble. Sharp's orchestral and improvisatory pieces create mammoth textures, moments of crystalline delicacy, and unexpected surprises. It is clear that there is a shared vocabulary across these different forms of composing and performing. In the scope of this article, I refer to the shared traits across these different modes of music making as "recombinant strategies." This terminology references Sharp's own interest in the sciences (in this case, genetics) as well as compositional strategies that resonate across different types of composing and performing, in particular between the improvisatory and through-composed ensemble pieces.

Focusing on the large-scale piece *Calling* (2002) and, to a lesser extent, *Racing Hearts* (1998), relationships between Sharp's algorithmic and structured improvisatory pieces will be drawn out as they inform the harmonies, timbres, and rhythmic elements of the orchestral works. To this end, important algorithmic ensemble works will also be explored, most especially *SyndaKit* (1998). Following this discussion, a brief consideration of very recent orchestral work, as well as the mammoth graphic composition, *Foliage* (2013) will be discussed. My hope here is to take on a task not unfamiliar to music theory and composition – the analysis of a large-scale orchestral work – with the ambitious goal of listening at the edges of the score's measures, to find moments in which the emergence of harmony, rhythm, timbre, and form reinforce and contradict one another unexpectedly, thereby forcing a greater consideration of musical space, as well as the instrumentalists and listeners within it.

II. Encouraging the Ir/Rational

Sharp's wide range of musical and extra-musical concerns may be broadly encompassed by what he calls the "Ir/Rational." Sharp describes the Ir/Rational as:

ir (an IRresistible pun)–the acoustics of sound in space and in the ear and its connection to the to [sic] perceptual engine:

the overtone series, difference tones, feedback, volume effects, <define melody>, <define groove>.

the rational: structure and order, algorithms of use and process, formal systems of organization, social and genre context, cross-reference.

overall–the ir/rational–chaos, intuition, the tangential. [2]

The above quote introduces many aspects of Sharp's work that are common to both the improvisatory and orchestral works. Sharp frequently uses a number of the aforementioned elements (the overtone series, difference tones, algorithms, etc). It is worth noting the play with programming syntax in the above quote, with its use of parentheses as well as leaving "melody" and "groove" up to the task of parenthetical definition. There is a clear engagement with the flexibility of systems (e.g., the "formal systems of organization") and their potential generative effects. "Melody" and "groove" become malleable and tied to emergent processes. Sharp often seeks flexible process and systems for manifesting the aforementioned elements – including chaos theory, fractals, and self-organization. As he states, "I believe my work bears the same relationship to 'real music' as science fiction bears to 'real science' or 'real literature.' For me it's a mode of working that gives me the greatest freedom. I call it 'Ir/rational [sic.] Music' as it includes both the ordered and rational, the intuitive and irrational, and the acoustics of the ear." [3] The vacillation between the ordered and the intuitive is tied to Sharp's relationship to his structured, algorithmic, improvisatory pieces, and so, a brief discussion of Sharp's relationship to improvisation and composition is warranted.

In many interviews, Sharp describes the relationship between improvisation and composition as a feedback loop, largely differentiated by the different time scales in which both take place, the former being immediate and real-time, and the latter more internal [4]. Sharp's own solo improvisations, captured elegantly in his solo guitar works *OCTAL (Books 1 & 2)*, feature many of the aspects implied by the Ir/Rational, that also comprise recombinant strategies – the emergence of saturated sonic textures, interlocking rhythmic patterns, and surprising tunings excited through harmonics and preparations. Sharp articulates his relationship between listening as a performer on a solo instrument, and then as a composer writing for the orchestra as one large instrument:

I like music that is saturated... The way I play, just as a single person playing an instrument comes the closest to how I hear things in my inner ear, so that when I'm writing an orchestral piece, that's what I want it to reflect – how I hear very personally. I'm not trying to... imitate something. I want it [my orchestral music] to be something that sounds like what I do... I can feel my identity is very tightly bound up in how I play whether I'm playing a guitar or a horn. It's like I have a sound that I make and that sound helps define myself to myself and for myself and to anyone who hears it. [5]

Sharp is concerned with maintaining a clear sonic identity within his pieces, even if they vary wildly in overall form and duration between different performances. Sharp often performs with small ensembles, though when the ensemble size is large, he finds algorithms and discrete structures useful for focusing the character of a given piece [6]. These sonic guidelines enable a balance between a consistent sonic identity and flexibility for the spontaneous in improvisation.

SyndaKit, one of Sharp's frequently performed algorithmic pieces, articulates a large number of musical tenets of Sharp's orchestral works, in part because *Calling* began initially as a simulation of *SyndaKit*. Similarly, *Racing Hearts* has its roots in an algorithmic improvisatory piece by the same title, initially premiered by the Spit Orchestra at the 1995 Bang On A Can Festival, and later fixed and performed by the Radio-Sinfonie Frankfurt in 1998. As explicitly stated in the score for *SyndaKit*, its essence "is a transformative groove composed of 144 cores divided among the 12 players and manifested through processes of imitation, addition, recombination, transposition, and improvisation." The performers are provided "cores" consisting of rhythmic and often pitched (transposable) fragments that serve as the basis of the improvisation. The task is to achieve rhythmic unison. However, each page of the score is unique, thereby forcing various rhythmic complexities to naturally emerge in the pursuit of this goal. Common themes in Sharp's algorithmic works include encouraging this form of self-organization, and the inevitable layers of sonic activity that shift in and out of different levels of pulsation (see for example, *DIGITAL* (1986)). *SyndaKit* successfully invokes the Ir/Rational as there is a clear sense of structure and identity within the piece, and yet great moments of surprise emerge during transitions from one sonic texture to the next.

The "cores" of *SyndaKit* are clearly evident in *Calling*. Repeated sixteenth notes on "C" and "G" are heard at the beginning of *Calling* (m. 5), adopting cores from different pages of *SyndaKit* (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 shows musical notation for the opening of *Calling* (mm. 2-5). On the left, two short musical fragments are shown: "core" from p. 5/12 of *SyndaKit* and "core" from p. 1/12 of *SyndaKit*. On the right, the score for mm. 2-5 of *Calling* is shown, featuring Violins 1 and 2, Viola/Cello (VC.), and Bass (bs.). The Violins play a sixteenth-note scale with a "sul pont." marking and a "3" indicating a triplet. The VC. and bs. parts also play a sixteenth-note scale with a "sul pont." marking. A "Violins: overtone sweep using bow placement and pressure" annotation is present. A "pulse accent" is marked on the VC. and bs. parts.

Figure 1: "cores" from *SyndaKit* (left) as manifested in the opening of *Calling* (right).

Though straightforward, this example reveals Sharp's initial treatment of *Calling* as a simulation of *SyndaKit*. It is worth noting that the rhythmic unison of these cores in m. 5 follows destabilizing glissandi as well as a major-seventh (enharmonically) between the cellos and bass. While these cores may present the first regular pulse in the composition, many simultaneous destabilizing and non-linear forces are at work – the "overtone sweep" in the violins, the pulsated accents of different divisions in the cellos and bass – all of which forge one larger texture that abrades the implied metrical uniformity of the upper strings. Emergent textures are encouraged, reminiscent of *SyndaKit*.

In *Racing Hearts*, the process of translation from structured improvisation to through-composed piece is explicit, likely because the initial improvisatory score was scored for full orchestra. Elements of the algorithmic score specify gradual transformation over time. Figure 2 is excerpted from the instruction sheet for the first violin section of the original version for Spit Orchestra.

A legato mf

After eight repetitions, players begin to gradually augment the duration of their target pitch (indicated by number) while maintaining the tempo of the rest of the phrase. By the end of the section, the duration (now a drone) of the target pitch will be 30" or more. Players may bow *sul ponticello* and use overtone replacements for pitches.

Figure 2: Excerpt of first violin part (rehearsal letter "A") from *Racing Hearts* (1995), Spit Orchestra version.

We can see this gradual transformation in the subsequent version of *Racing Hearts* in Figure 3. Though the rhythmic character of the versions differ, an eight-beat long "core" is maintained in both versions. The subsequent process of transformation between both scores is similar, starting with discrete pitches, a select few of which gradually become elongated. The transformation in the through-composed version is starker than the improvisatory version, as the violins begin with a "staccato scrape" as opposed to *legato* in the improvisatory version. Intriguingly, the strings tend to shift toward higher pitches in unison as a section in the fixed version, whereas in the the algorithmic version, each player would have targeted a designated pitch in the cycle, some of which overlap. Though similar in process and pitch content, in the fixed version of *Racing Hearts*, the first violin section behaves entirely as a section, while in the algorithmic version, each member of the section behaves as an individual. Both versions share a common goal, while the notational efficiencies of each system (algorithmic versus through-composed) and the behaviors they encourage differ. More about pitch content will be discussed later.

Violin I staccato scrape

Violin II staccato scrape

Viola

Cello

Bass

Racing Hearts, mm. 1 - 2

Racing Hearts, mm. 41 - 42

Racing Hearts, mm. 57 - 58

Figure 3: *Racing Hearts* (1998), Radio-Sinfonie Frankfurt version. Elongation of opening motives.

Important elements in both the fixed and through-composed versions of *Racing Hearts* are the interlocking rhythms that emerge amongst the players. Sharp creates hockets by repeating “grooves” in each instrument, which gradually transform over time (as in Figure 3). In addition to hockets, interlocking parts are formed by shifting similar musical lines slightly out of phase with one another. This type of musical interplay has less to do with minimalist composition techniques per se, than with taking a musical idea and “mutating” it, recombining it with itself over and over so that minute changes accumulate and impact the overall musical texture. The accumulation of differences often either merge into a unison or ripple into entirely new textures for the orchestra. One thrilling example of this is an extended trumpet duet in *Calling*. The line introduced by the first trumpet is performed by the second, shifted by an eighth note (Figure 4A). Instead of continually shifting the off-set of the duet, each line maintains its temporal displacement while introducing their own variants to the musical strain, at times interjecting triplets, jumping up and down the octave, or sustaining notes occasionally (Figure 4B).

The image displays a musical score for a trumpet duet from the piece *Calling*, measures 286 to 290. It consists of two staves, Tpt. I and Tpt. II. Tpt. I begins at measure 261 with a triplet of eighth notes. Tpt. II enters at measure 264 with a similar pattern, shifted by an eighth note. The score includes dynamic markings like 'p' and 'flowing', and a 'foil mute' instruction. The key signature has one flat, and the time signature is 4/4.

Fig. 4B: Trumpet Duet, *Calling* (mm. 286 - 290).

The orchestra gradually builds around this duet, adding their own repeated patterns, allowing for different “rhythmic cores” to bubble up to the sonic surface. Occasionally, single instruments will “pop out” of the texture – a high piccolo (m. 346), a piano scraping the strings inside the piano (m. 338) or jumping in with an intricate soloistic passage (m.352). The notion of “popping out” hearkens back to Sharp’s algorithmic scores, as in *SyndaKit* and *Hammer Anvil Stirrup* (1988) players are encouraged to sonically jump out of the existing texture and play an entirely different improvisational statement, and then jump back in to the encompassing groove of the group. The recombinant strategies of creating “mutations” forge intricate textures that settle into various “grooves,” only to shift through these sporadic, individual assertions and, in so doing, reveal a different facet of the overall sonic texture. Sharp refers to these shifts as follows:

...a texture opens up, and you reveal something that the inner workings of it are producing as an artifact, but it's inherently part of the structure, and yet you don't necessarily hear it until you bend the structure a little bit and all of a sudden these things reveal themselves. ...I'd like to think of them as psychoacoustic effects. [7]

Sharp's reference to highlighting specific parts of a rich sonic texture correlate with the idea of saturation mentioned earlier. The intensity of the accumulated sound within Sharp's orchestrations are all-encompassing. The self-organizing elements, simulated by the interlocking rhythms, mutations, and varying levels of pulsation in the ensemble, are reinforced by Sharp's treatment of orchestration and harmony, both of which draw on his work with electronic and non-western musics, as well as his deep interest in the nonlinearities of sound production and perception. The "psychoacoustic effects" Sharp references in the above quote are intertwined with the timbres he coaxes from the ensemble.

III. Instruments, Nonlinearities, and Space

Sharp is equally concerned about the production of sound and the physical hearing of it. The ability to perceive tone and its relationship to an overall sonic texture and acoustical space serve as points for exploration. These explorations have their root in Sharp's instrumental playing and algorithmic, improvisatory pieces. A number of Sharp's pieces, such as *SyndaKit*, center around four pitches: C, G, A-flat, and A. Sharp determined these pitches by applying Fibonacci numbers (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, etc...) to just-toned intervals (C - 1:1; G - 3:2; A-flat - 8/5; A - 5/3). Sharp vividly recounts this moment of discovery:

I found that certain ratios of adjacent Fibonacci numbers coincided with ratios of just-intoned intervals. I translated these ratios to a tuning on electric guitar with 1/1=C and restricted myself to playing only the open strings and overtones using various picking and tapping techniques. ... I was astounded at the results - liquid harmonic melodies pouring off the strings. It was just after midnight when I began playing, sunrise when I stopped. The results were so encouraging that I decided to dig in deeper with a number of strategies for utilization of the Fibonacci series. Besides the primary approach of harmonic tuning, these included mapping the ratios to rhythms and to proportions for structures. [8]

The description of these "liquid harmonic melodies" revels in the pleasure of discovery possible in algorithmic systems. The influence of Fibonacci numbers can be seen throughout Sharp's work. Returning briefly to rhythm – many rhythmic groupings often cluster around the numbers 2, 3, 5, and 8. Equally important to the intervallic content of this pitch group are the excitation of pitches – the "various picking and tapping techniques." With this pitch grouping, there is often a stable perfect interval (C - G) combined with more dissonant major and minor seconds (from the A-flat and A). Arranging these in different octaves creates varying levels of dissonance and stability. For example, the G's and C's in the violins and cellos in the opening of *Calling* (Figure 1) are placed slightly off-kilter by the G# in the basses. The lowest pitches

of the bass are more difficult to discern, and yet the G# engenders a more turbulent texture than a reinforcing G or C. Add to this the differently pulsed accents between the bass and cellos along with the “overtone sweeps” in the upper strings, and the entire texture becomes polymorphous.

Sharp’s formation of saturated textures frequently uses the aforementioned pitch combinations. At times, Sharp transposes these intervals when the instruments of a given ensemble resonate better at a different fundamental. Perfect intervals frequently occur in combination with seconds. These pitch combinations have less to do with the formation a specific chordal function than with creating unstable harmonies, the discernment of which depends on the execution of the performance and the listener’s interpretation. As Sharp states:

I’ll have 2 or 3 pitches that are a semitone apart on different instruments, and depending on which instrument comes to the foreground, you think of that as the fundamental, but it’s ambiguous... as the instruments play, their volume shifts a little, you get difference tone effects... and you destroy the sense of what the fundamental pitch is... it’s by design because then you shift how you hear what is happening on top. [9]

The strategy of unstable pitch combinations is reinforced by orchestration. In addition to encouraging difference tones between instruments, Sharp frequently instructs performers to obscure the pitch, play overtone sweeps (or glissandi), to vary accentuation, or to play in such a manner that the overtones from an instrument are maximized.

31

H

198 201

Pno. *f* *cresc.*

204

207 210

Picc.

Pno. *ppp* *ff*

Vln. I *p*

Vln. II *p*

Vla. *p*

VC. *p*

Bass *p*

All strings: slide finger 2 slowly for overtone sweep on open string

Fig. 5: *Calling*, mm. 197 - 211.

The play with overtones reaches across Sharp's instrumental playing, his improvisatory ensemble pieces, and his through-composed ensemble work as well. An extended piano solo midway through the piece (Figure 5) demonstrates this. The insistent, repeated G in the piano with the sustain pedal continually depressed allows overtones to shift in and out of focus in the acoustical space with changes in the rhythm. The piccolo and strings sweeping the overtone series, also on G's, enter at m. 209 at a quiet dynamic while the piano remains prominent. A cascade of harmonics follow, with the overtones from the piano solo still ringing in the space.

Sharp's use of extended techniques also play with varying the noise elements present within a sound. This at times comes from instructions to "growl" into a brass instruments or play *sul ponticello* in the strings. One exciting example of integrating noise elements into a musical texture occurs during a bass drum duet (mm. 526 - 537) in *Calling* (Figure 6).

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Fig. 6: Bass drum duet, *Calling* (mm. 526 - 537).

The two drums perform repeated musical patterns – the first bass drum repeats a five measure long phrase twice, and the second a three measure phrase three times. Fibonacci numbers are applied here as organizational elements (i.e., for groups of measures). One measure of additional rhythmic pattern is added to the second bass drum at the end of this cycle (m. 536) so that both percussionists land in unison. There is a spatial play at work with both drums being physically separated on stage. The percussionists are further defined by the integration of these noise elements, as each bass drum has different rattles – one wooden (percussionist 1), the other metal (percussionist 2) – affixed to the head of the drum. Each drum decays differently, creating what Sharp refers to as “live” or “acoustic granulation” [10]. The reference to “granulation” illustrates Sharp’s interest in sound synthesis techniques (in this case, granular synthesis). Additionally, the integration of the rattles overlaps with Sharp’s interest in non-western musics, as many African instruments, such as the mbira, often feature buzzing or rattling as an integral part of the instrumental sound.

Sharp's overlapping interest in electronic, experimental, and non-Western musics evolved in part because he encountered them simultaneously for the first time during a brief stint as a DJ. Listening voraciously to multiple musics, Sharp was awestruck by the use of bending, slides, distortion, and the ways in which instruments could be transformed across different styles of music. Sharp then sought to recreate these different sounds, becoming in the process a renowned blues guitarist, instrument inventor, and explorer of different tuning systems. Sharp describes these overlapping interests:

My interest in non-western musics led me to investigate and incorporate various approaches to intonation and rhythm. I'm acutely aware of intonation and its subtlety and power – microtonality, whether in the bends and slides of the blues or the glissandi of Xenakis, has always been an important part of my vocabulary [11].

The use of bends and glissandi are seen across Sharp's work and playing as well. This type of textural bending can be thought of as a recombinant strategy as well. For example, various *glissandi*, noticeably all from C, are possible within the different "cores" of *SyndaKit*, they can be used in the moment by any member of the ensemble, and others can jump in and merge with another's glissando. Slides within *Calling* forge major shifts in texture, and are used to articulate beginnings and ends of musical sections, as well as begin and end the entire piece. These bends and slides are unusually absent from *Racing Hearts*, which will be discussed more later. When glissandi occur in *Calling*, they are often executed by a number of instruments across the ensemble. The orchestra acts like one large instrument, stretching its timbres and tuning in a manner that sounds specific to Sharp's musical work, and draws its inspiration from a wide range of musics. When asked about the relationships between his admiration for the elements of the blues, including its slides, and his approach to orchestral writing, Sharp responded:

I do want the orchestra to sing, I want it to feel like it is somehow vocal [and also have] the strings... [start] out very grindy and non-pitch specific and then maybe evolve into a cloud of pitches or... become percussion instruments... it's not harmonically based in a traditional sense but it is about creating verticalities, simultaneous verticalities... that's my definition of harmony. [12]

Sharp's multiple musical interests reveal a preoccupation with the production and perception of sound and how both may be explored through gradual, textural transformation. In this way, the orchestra can both "sing" and feature strings acting as "percussion instruments" that gradually form "simultaneous verticalities" (as seen in Figure 1). As mentioned earlier, the harmony is indivisible from the orchestration – the simultaneous verticalities are felt across the orchestra as one large instrument, that at times acts as a synthesizer, a prepared instrument, or both.

A thrilling example of Sharp's treatment of the orchestra as one large instrument occurs in mm. 615 - 669. The orchestra strikes a number of chords in unison, referencing the Fibonacci derived pitches of C, G, and G-sharp (treated as an enharmonic equivalent of A-flat). Each orchestral hit is often followed by a few beats of silence, allowing the massive orchestral sound to reverberate in the space. Suddenly, at measure 651, the violins sustain their pitches longer than the rest of the orchestra, rapidly decrescendoing to a *pi-anissimo* (Figure 7). What we hear is one large instrument, struck repeatedly to hear how it resonates. Sharp likens this to striking a "prepared guitar" that will have some strings decay at different rates than others based on preparations [13]. In this moment, the rhythmic, harmonic, and resonant properties of the

The musical score for 'Calling' (mm. 647-654) is presented in a grand staff format. The instruments are listed on the left: Picc., A. Fl., Oboe, Bs. Cl. I, Is. Cl. II, Bsn., Hrn., Tpt. I, Tpt. II, Tb. I, Tb. II, Tuba, Pno., B. D., B. D., Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., VC., and Bass. The measures are numbered 648, 651, and 654 at the top. The score shows a series of chords in unison, with the violins (Vln. I and Vln. II) sustaining their pitches longer than the rest of the orchestra, rapidly decrescendoing to a *pi-anissimo* (pp) at measure 651. The dynamic markings *f*, *pp*, and *f* are visible in the violin staves.

Fig. 7: *Calling*, mm. 647 - 654.

orchestra fuse, creating a large, saturated texture that plays with the physicality of the combined instruments as well as the resonant space itself. The physicality of playing as well as hearing is highlighted, demonstrating this utmost concern that cuts across Sharp's different musical personae. As Sharp states, "For me, music is always physical. I want it to be felt deep in my guts, whether I'm listening to it or making it." [14]

IV: The Emergence of Form

Thus far, we've examined recombinant strategies that cut across Sharp's works, which include methods of transforming rhythmic and melodic lines. These methods may include creating hockets and interlocking musical lines, emphasizing the overtones produced by acoustical instruments, working with extended techniques, as well as integrating noise elements into musical textures. Recombinant strategies clearly emerge from Sharp's concern with the Ir/Rational as it engages a wide range of musics, draws on the physicality of sound and acoustics, and flexible systems that manifest grooves and melodies differently depending on the musical context. Since both *Racing Hearts* and *Calling* are simulations of algorithmic, improvisatory pieces, the next point of exploration are the forms that emerge from this enactment of a bottom-up process, and are ultimately prescribed within the score. We will begin first with an exploration of *Racing Hearts*, then *Calling*, and finally examine some recent developments in Sharp's orchestral work.

A unique element of *Racing Hearts* is that it has an interstitial stage of development that *Calling* does not since it began first as a structured, improvisatory orchestral piece, and then later was fully notated. As a result, the conductor has a master guideline for the piece, showing in condensed form the global structure as it relates to each of the instrumental sections (Figure 8). Comparing the algorithmic orchestral score to the fully notated score is illustrative of the differences that can be worked out in fully scored notation, that otherwise might be coaxed from the ensemble in a more improvisatory context. In the case of *Racing Hearts*, the overall structure is consistent between both versions of the score. Each instrumental section enters with repeated fragments (R1 [strings], R2 [winds], and R3 [brass]) that gradually become elongated into drones (denoted by the "+" and following "\$" symbols in the original algorithmic score). Once each of the initial repeated fragments are introduced, a "fractal cloud" characterized by fleeting sixteenth note melodic fragments emerges ("~"), followed by two ensemble-wide hockets ("H1" and "H2" in the algorithmic score). Following these ensemble-wide hockets, each of the repeated fragments (R1, R2, & R3) recur simultaneously, gradually becoming elongated, until the entire ensemble ends on a final sustained chord.

	A 0	B 2.0	C 3.0	D 5.0	E 6	F 8	G 9.5	H 13	I 16	J 18	20
V1	R1 +	<u>+</u>	\$	<u>\$</u>	\$	~	H1	H2	R1+	\$	
V2	R1 +	<u>+</u>	\$	<u>\$</u>	\$	~	H1	H2	R1+	\$	
VL	R1 +	<u>+</u>	\$	<u>\$</u>	\$	~	H1	H2	R1+	\$	
C	⁴ ■ R1 +	<u>+</u>	\$	<u>\$</u>	\$	~	H1	H2	R1 +	\$	
B	■	<u>\$</u>	\$	<u>\$</u>	\$	~	H1	H2	+	\$	
FL	■	■	R2	<u>+</u>	\$	~	H1	H2	R2 +	\$	
CL	■	■	R2	<u>+</u>	\$	~	H1	H2	R2 +	\$	
OB	■	■	R2	<u>+</u>	\$	~	H1	H2	R2 +	\$	
BS	■	■	R2	<u>+</u>	\$	~	H1	H2	R2 +	\$	
TPT	■	■	■	■	R3+ ^{→1'30"} \$	~	H1	H2	R3 +	\$	
TB	■	■	■	■	R3+ \$	~	H1	H2	R3 +	\$	
HNS	■	■	■	■	R3+ \$	~	H1	H2	R3 +	\$	
PNO	■	✱	■	■	■	~	→ 3' ■ H1	→ 2'30" ■ H2	■	→ 1'30" ■	
PC1	■	■	■	✱	■	■	■ H1	■ H2	■	■	
PC2	■	■	■	✱	■	■	■ H1	■ H2	■	■	

+ augmentation of target pitch \$ drone ✱ piano/perc. feature ~ fractal cloud

Fig. 8: *Racing Hearts*, Spit Orchestra Version: Conductor Score.

Though the global structure is more or less similar between both versions of *Racing Hearts*, the subtle differences between the fixed and algorithmic version are intriguing. For example, the entering repeated patterns in the strings are more staggered in the fully scored version than in the algorithmic version – and this is true of all repeated patterns. Usually one instrumental group enters first, and then is followed by others. This is clearly a process of transcription, that is, to stagger in time what would otherwise happen improvisationally. Most striking are moments in which an entire instrumental group interjects a percussive hit in the midst of another group's repeated melodic fragment. The first example of this is at m. 103 of *Racing Hearts*, in which the strings *pizzicato* at the downbeat of the bar while the winds are in the midst of developing "R2".

Additional moments of discrepancy occur when instruments from different sections play along with a given repeated pattern. An example of this occurs in m. 53 when the first trumpet repeats a dyadic figure of



Fig. 9: *Racing Hearts*, *Radio-Sinfonie Frankfurt* version, (mm. 53 - 56).

F# and G# amongst the elongation of the repeated pattern in the strings (Figure 9). Furthermore, while the algorithmic score implies that the presence of the string and wind drones accumulates, this is not the case. The strings and winds each sustain their drones separately, and then subsequently rest in the through-composed version. This is especially the case at rehearsal letter “F” (m. 167) of the through-composed version, in which the strings and winds both sustain their drones momentarily, and then rest on the downbeat of the same bar in which the repeated fragment (R3) for the brass begins. This is a question of orchestration. Whereas the algorithmic score implies a comprehensive accumulation of tones, the fully scored version allows space for each repeated fragment of an instrumental group to develop. Both scorings work beautifully, they simply inhabit acoustical, and therefore notational, space differently.

The differences in scoring acoustical and notational space are intriguing, both reveal different aspects of a desired process. In the case of an algorithmic score, much can be worked out in the rehearsal process, and become part of the aural tradition that accompanies much improvisatory and experimental work. In the scope of a fully scored work, the performers are often assumed to be anonymous, and therefore, interjections and moments of spontaneity become fully scored. In the case of *Racing Hearts*, this might happen across the ensemble writ large (e.g., the string pizzicato interjection), versus a player deciding at the spur of the moment to “pop out” of the given instrumental texture. Thus, it is possible to hear a global structure that is consistent across both versions of *Racing Hearts*, and acknowledge that the different formats of each rendition naturally lend themselves to distinct sonic results. Relationships to possible global forms, however, differ in the case of *Calling*.

As discussed earlier, *Calling* acts in part as a simulation of *SyndaKit*. In this case, there is no pre-existing specifically orchestral, algorithmic improvisatory score to be expressed *linearly* over time as in the case of *Racing Hearts*. *SyndaKit* is expressly non-linear and self-organizing. *Calling*, like *SyndaKit*, has numerous peaks and valleys in terms of sonic density. The orchestration is enormously complex. A sonic texture accumulates, only to reveal another subtle instrumental texture underneath it, that in turn, crests and merges with another sonic texture. These at times culminate in enormous, group resonances, as in Figure 7, when the ensemble coalesces on a single sonority, rearticulates it over and over again, and in so doing, asserts the physicality of the performance and the acoustical space in which it takes place.

Calling follows *Racing Hearts*, and Sharp considers it a refinement of the processes explored in *Racing Hearts*. As such, it is not surprising to find moments when the ensemble in *Calling* forms one large-scale texture reminiscent of *Racing Hearts*. What remains distinct between both pieces is the level of local detail for each instrumental group. As mentioned earlier, *Racing Hearts* features no *glissandi*, while the slide is a major facet of much of Sharp’s playing and algorithmic work. It seems that *Calling* began not from a global structure – as in *Racing Hearts* – but from a bottom-up structure that is encouraged in *SyndaKit*. In *Calling*, the *glissandi* emerge across the ensemble, though fully-scored, as a group dynamic. *Calling* displays surprising intensity that is reminiscent of the earlier algorithmic scores. There is no preparation for the aforementioned trumpet or bass drum duets – they emerge from nowhere, and yet reveal themselves to be vitally necessary to the overall sonic textures. Most surprising is a final transposition into the highest octaves of a repeated piano fragment along with bowed crotals near the end of *Calling* (m. 793). In this instance, instrumental fragments that had been present throughout the composition are transformed without warning. This forms a moment of breath, of great possibility, in which the listener hears the high-end of the frequency spectrum unexpectedly emphasized. A delicate texture, that has been present in the overall sonic previously, is suddenly highlighted.

This sudden shift in texture returns us to the Ir/Rational. This brief moment utilizes certain easily identifiable elements of the aforementioned Ir/Rational (difference tones, etc.). However, I want to return to the more difficult-to-pin-down aspects of “social context” and request to “cross-reference.” Though grouped with the “rational,” social context and the act of cross-referencing are easily permeated by the irrational, especially when one considers the context in which *Calling* was composed. Sharp began *Calling*, as he says, on September 12th, 2001 while he was living in the designated “frozen zone” in lower Manhattan. At the time, Sharp wrote *Calling* “because it seemed the only way to make any sense out of reality... [*Calling* is] like a wake up call, or like an alarm,... ‘what’s my job here? what’s my calling here?’ It’s my job to write this music” [15]. Knowing this context, the intensity and contrasts created by these textures acquire a poignancy based on one’s own memories and experiences. Sharp’s music engages with the broader “social-context,” drawing on what may (or may not) be shared knowledge. Sharp’s description of this process is illustrative in this regard:

Music is an acoustic process. It’s about psychoacoustic chemical change and what happens when ears process information. Of course, when an ear processes information, it’s interacting with everything that you know, everything you remember—which for some people might not be much—and everything you might imagine. So it’s a much larger system than just a bunch of notes, than just harmony and melody. [16]

Sharp’s music, which works with systems, also recognizes this much “larger system” bigger than “a bunch of notes.” The idea of interacting with “everything that you know, everything you remember” is inherently non-linear and unpredictable, forming different moments of surprise, intensity, and indifference for each individual. This returns us to the Ir/Rational, which cuts across the wide range of musics in which Sharp is active. The recombinant strategies explored thus far as they emerge from the the Ir/Rational – “chaos, intuition, [and] the tangential” – reveal possibility, and demonstrate that there is still much to be explored.

Following *Calling* and *Racing Hearts*, the play with musical layers and levels of density has continued in Sharp’s orchestral work. In recent works, Sharp’s relationship to notation has also begun to shift. Sharp notes that he has enjoyed the efficiency of traditional notation, and that, with a couple of “added doodads [it is] able to stand up to the task” of creating an “open feel” in a through-composed composition [17]. *Calling* takes advantage of the efficiencies of traditional notation. And yet, the musical result is always much *more* than what is prescribed in the score, in large part because the orchestration involves extended

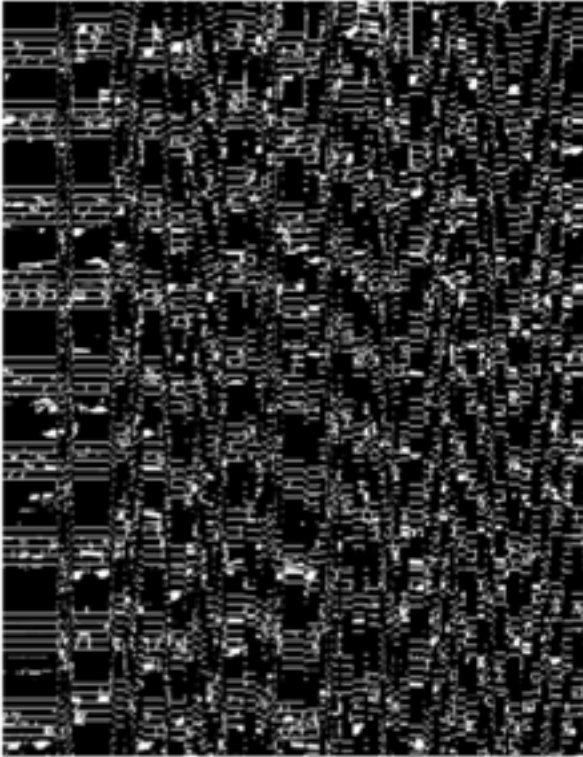


Fig. 10: *Foliage*, excerpt.

techniques and the accumulation of sound in space. At the same time, Sharp has recently applied his interests in signal processing to musical notation itself. In a recent body of work, *Foliage*, processes normally associated with sound synthesis techniques – filtering, spectral remapping, granulation – are applied to images of music notation (Figure 10). It is then up to the performer to interpret these processes as they are visually manifested on the page. In *Foliage*, the electronic process leaves a visual artifact of what is normally solely auditory, and the performer interprets the modulated boundaries between traditional and graphic notation.

Intriguingly, Sharp has begun to incorporate elements of *Foliage* into his orchestral work, with pieces such as *Oneirika* (2012), commissioned by

Maerzmusik and written for Zeitkratzer. The recombinant strategies continue – a process experimented with in one context provides a point of exploration for different ensemble configurations. In this case, the

Fig. 11: *Oneirika*, page 3.

act of score reading, improvisation, and the interpolation between the two is highlighted as part of the performative process. *Process* is the operative word in each of the compositions explored thus far, and extend to *Foliage*. Process occurs in improvisation, in instrumental transcription, in orchestration, and finally with the notional artifact itself. The recombinant strategies are manifestations of consistent musical concerns across these different means of engaging with sound. In Sharp's orchestral works, as well as much of his algorithmic music and instrumental playing, processes encourage a variety of sonic textures, invite the unexpected, and compel our listening to adjust accordingly. This feedback loop is inherent in the *Ir/Rational* – our perceptions arrange themselves as much as the musicians realizing the material in any given moment.

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The String Quartets of Christian Wolff

radio feature

by Marc Sabat

broadcast in German by Deutschlandradio Berlin, 11 March 2014

producer: Carolin Naujocks

Christian Wolff's music for string quartet was presented in Berlin as the centerpiece of two concerts, on 26 and 30 November 2013, played by the Los Angeles-based Formalist Quartet: Andrew McIntosh and Mark Menzies alternating on violin and viola, with Andrew Tholl on violin and Ashley Walters on cello.

The entire project, called »OUT OF TUNES«, was organised by Berlin-based Canadian composer Marc Sabat and co-presented by the series "Unerhörte Musik" at BKA and the Universität der Künste in the Joseph Joachim Konzertsaal, with support from the UdK International Office, the new music institute "klangzeitort" and the Embassy of the United States of America. Workshops with music written by student composers were combined with lecture-demonstrations about the diverse notations and interpretation demands of Wolff's five works for string quartet: *Summer* (1961), *Lines* (1972), *String Quartet Exercises Out Of Songs* (1974–76), *For EC* (2003) and *For 2 violinists, violist and cellist* (2008).

The overall theme of the workshops was to consider "intonation". Of course, this was considered in terms of microtonally differentiating pitches. More generally, it also involved exploring how musicians adapt sounds in terms of rhythm, phrasing, timbre, etc. as they are being made and become superposed with other sounds in often unpredictably complex ways. This perspective about intonation, including a text by Christian Wolff, is pursued in depth through a series of curated essays collected in two volumes (16 and 17) of the journal *KunstMusik*, published by World Edition (Köln) in 2014–15.

The following radio broadcast included excerpts from the live performances of the Formalist Quartet, text passages drawn from correspondence between the author and Christian Wolff, and excerpts from "Hinweise: Schriften und Gespräche" (Edition MusikTexte Band 005, published in 1998 by Gisela Gronemeyer und Reinhard Oehlschlägel).

* * *

[the program begins with music: "For EC" (2003) by Christian Wolff]

The string quartet miniature "For EC": a tongue-in-cheek homage written in 2003 for Elliott Carter's 95th birthday by American composer Christian Wolff, who is himself celebrating his 80th birthday in 2014.

We composers can often be one other's toughest critics, but recently, after hearing a remarkable live performance, I was deeply impressed by the rough beauty of Wolff's current music. It seems to me distinct from the work of his closely associated colleagues because of the certainty with which its author abandons any position of heroic proclamation. Wolff allows the provisional, incomplete nature of *writing* music itself to become manifest and thus questions our inclination to judge these very qualities.

At the same time, the musicians playing are offered space for creative work, invited to participate in completing the composition, to find ways of making Wolff's precisely fragile scoring sing. The almost crude becomes absolutely gorgeous, that which actually happened inevitable, perfect. By staying true to the human condition – that life and work take place in real time – this music reminds each of us listeners of a social, collective situation taking place: the coexistence of sounds in a common space. The simplicity of melodies and rhythms, their radically strange continuity, reminds us that they are simply some cues to experiencing music, that is: shared listening, shared responsibility.

His close colleague and (for a very brief time) teacher John Cage once described listening to Wolff's music as discovering "the classical music of an unknown civilization".

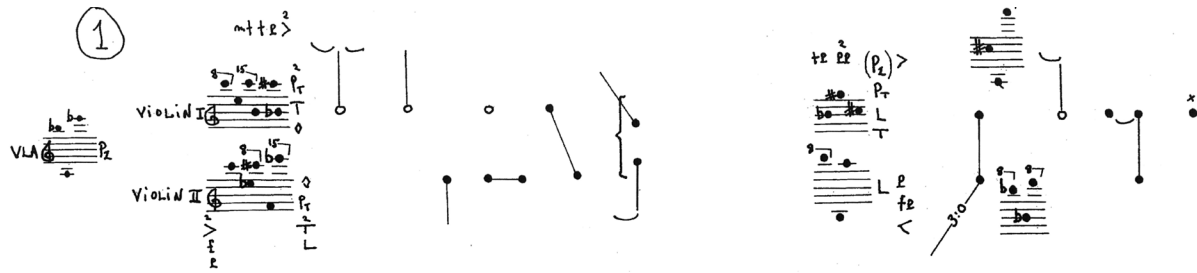
When I began composing I had the notion — I don't really know where it came from — perhaps an adolescent impulse — that I should make a music unlike any other. I was encouraged too by hearing for the first time, after a long immersion in the older Western classical music (roughly from Bach to Brahms), the string quartet music of Bartók, Berg, Schoenberg and Webern. (This was in 1949 when opportunities for hearing this music even in New York were very rare, and no recordings were available.) The music, especially in its sonorities — the kinds of noise it made, its continuities, its dissonances, felt extraordinarily bracing and like nothing I had encountered before, and by virtue of this, liberating. I wanted in my way to do the same. And for the next twenty or so years this is what I tried to do, making a music which, whatever else might be said about it, could be called experimental in the senses of that word suggested so far.

...

In 1950–52 I began with minimalist pieces using small numbers of pitches (three to nine) in static configurations, and then (1953–56) went on to more complex, through-composed ones using intricate structural devices to produce "discontinuous" continuities, including a lot of silence. In 1957, as the immediate result of a collaboration with Frederic Rzewski, I started making pieces variously indeterminate. Ranges of choices were given to the performers — time brackets, source pitches, variously applicable playing specifications, cueing systems, rhythmic notations determined not by pulse but by coordinations, both predictable and not, between players. Because of the range of the performers' choices, both at the times of preparing and during the process of actually performing, and because of the unpredictable interactions between performers that would result, the music inevitably and variously changes with each performance.

Wolff's first string quartet, "Summer" was written in 1961 at the request of the LaSalle Quartet, and is dedicated to another close colleague and friend, Morton Feldman. It is a mobile form, consisting of five cued sections of material, each of which may recur at any time and continue as long as desired during the course of a performance of the piece. In each section, the players are divided into two pairs, and each duo proceeds more or less independently, following separately notated parts. Available pitches are specified, as are dynamics, timbres, and possible coordinations of sounds, both within each duo as well as to indeterminate sounds heard from the other pair. The actual sound-combinations produced, therefore, result from a complex network of interactions and do not follow any fixed scheme. A performance may be of any length.

[music: "Summer" (1961)]



Ex. 1: excerpt from score of "Summer"

In the late 1960s Wolff spent time in London, where he performed on electric bass together with English experimental composer Cornelius Cardew and the free improvisation group AMM. These experiences initiated a period of musical transition.

"Edges" (1968) incorporates improvisation around the edges of mostly graphic notations: signs on the score are not primarily what a player plays. They mark out a space or spaces, indicate points, surfaces, routes or limits. "Prose Collection" (1968–71) goes even further, trying to find ways of writing experimental music for non-professional performers, including people with no previous experience, by simply providing brief text instructions. Perhaps an emblematic response to this politically charged year, Wolff's "Stones" asks the players to

Make sounds with stones, draw sounds out of stones... For the most part striking stones with stones... Do not break anything.

In his second work for string quartet, "Lines" (1972), commissioned by Hans Otte for Radio Bremen, Wolff uses several different notations: fragments of conventional pitches and rhythms, graphic diagrams, and text scores to suggest *possibly* but not *necessarily* unusual approaches to playing, both for each as individual musicians, and also for the ensemble as collective.

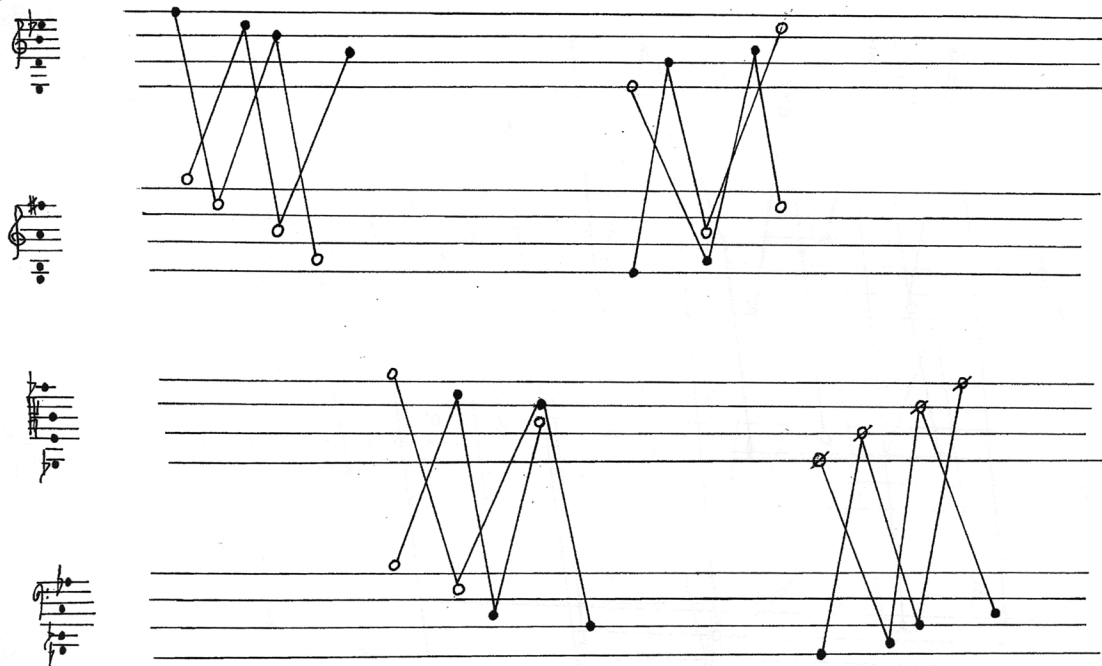
The composition began with the desire to find new string sonorities and with a formal notion related to the actual lines of the (four) individual strings of each instrument and the lines described as a sound passes from one of the (four) instruments to another. Retuning the four instruments' individual strings — so that sixteen different pitches become available on their open strings — underscores the line of each string. The players are spaced far apart in performance to help show the lines of sound between them.

The score first specifies exactly the connections of these lines (say, from viola to first violin to cello) but their speed of movement (and certain aspects of articulation, dynamics, et cetera) is determined by the players in the course of playing... Next the players individually draw their material freely from more distinctly characterized bits of music (which are repeatable, as is all the material in the score). Here coordination is free or circumstantial (for example, hold a sound until the next sound you hear, whoever produces it). The material now also includes provision for retuning the strings to their usual pitches. Finally the score takes the form of prose instructions, requiring continuous sound from the players, to be changed in response to changes, whenever these happen to occur, in the playing of another. The specific character of an individual player's sound, texture, melodic continuity, et cetera, are now entirely her or his choice. The music as a whole, then, is a collaboration between the composer's score and the players' playing, and the latter becomes increasingly directed by the players' own decisions and feelings — the forming of which may have been assisted by the score to begin with.

[music: "Lines" (1972)]

The String Quartets of Christian Wolff

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Ex. 2: excerpt from score of "Lines"

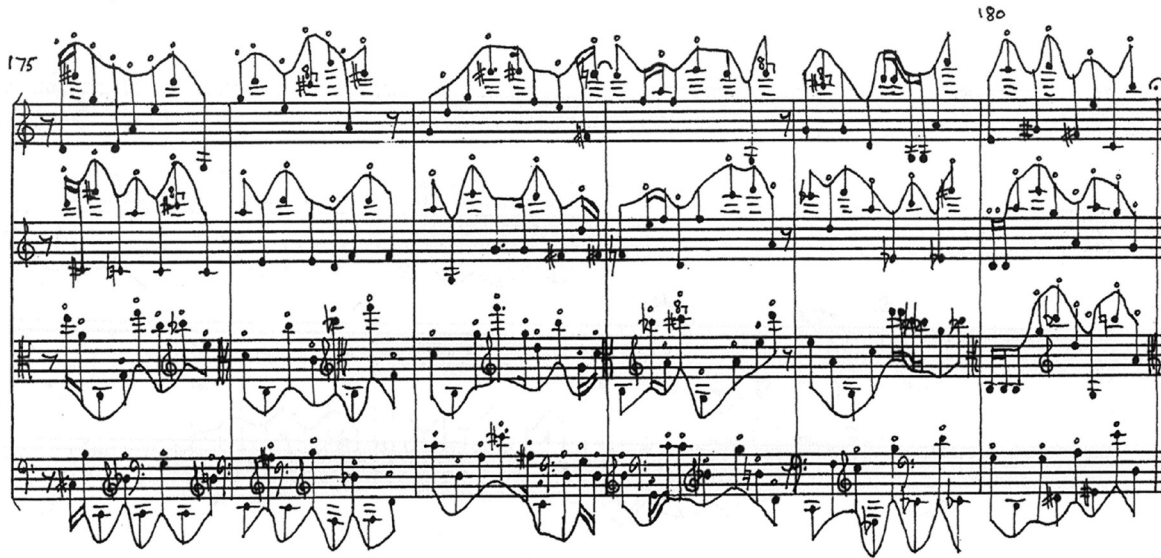
In the recently completed "Burdocks" (1970–71) and also in "Lines", Wolff begins to compose melodies alongside other, more abstract musical materials and processes. In the works which follow, it becomes clear that a radical aesthetic transformation of his musical attitudes is taking place.

...in the early seventies something caught up with me. Like many people at the time — and they included a number of musicians with whom I worked, I was ... politicized... My previous work now seemed to me too esoteric, and, because of its performance requirements, involving the players in a kind of exclusive, intense concentration of each other's sounds, too introverted: the gap between the performers' involvement with a piece's sound and the listeners' seemed too large. What I was doing musically seemed mostly inaccessible to people (including good friends) who were generally speaking music-lovers.

Wolff's "String Quartet Exercises Out Of Songs", composed 1974–76 for the Concord String Quartet, address the question of associative musical "content", as distinct from purely formal, structural procedures. Each of the three exercises is based on a traditional political song: first a Chinese folk song used in the 1940s as the revolutionary hymn "Workers and Peasants are One Family", followed by Hanns Eisler's 1929 "Comintern Song". In Exercise #3, the Harlan County miner's song from the 1930s, given the words "Which Side Are You On?" by Florence Reese, is used to remind listeners of a labor struggle in the USA contemporary with Wolff's composition, the Brookside Strike against Duke Power, also documented in Barbara Kopple's 1976 film "Harlan County, USA".

Marc Sabat

[music: "#3" from "String Quartet Exercises Out Of Songs" (1974–6)]



Ex. 3: excerpt from score of "String Quartet Exercises Out Of Songs"

In his composition, Wolff finds ways of composing instrumental variations that echo the subject matter alluded to in the songs, while maintaining the provisional, exploratory quality of "experimental" music. The instruments often play clearly and directly, sometimes even crudely, in octaves and unisons, or share a single line in hocketed fashion, underlining the roughness and intensity of human work in the music-making process. The original song provides both a formal plan of strophic variations with occasionally melodic ritornelli, as well as the raw intervallic materials which the composition elaborates, flowing freely in and out of recognizability.

After composing the "String Quartet Exercises", almost thirty years pass before Wolff returns to the string quartet medium to compose the miniature which we heard at the beginning of this broadcast.

'For E.C.' was written in 2003 at the request of a group who were putting together a birthday concert for Elliott Carter. I thought, a bit mischievously, I'd make the piece somewhat like Carter but the way I wished Carter might sound. ... You're right about my using the letters in E.C.'s name. There are no specific references to Carter's music, but, as I just mentioned, an attempt to allude to it in a general way, as in a kind of sound, also sometimes poly-rhythmic patches, and few somewhat virtuosic gestures (not usual with me). Like Carter I do (in general) work systematically. I should be able to account for every pitch choice - though I often later forget how I made them. There is always some kind of transpositional process, which may start out with a 'given', a tune (or part of one), or musical letters in a name, or just a simple move (a four note scale, say). Rhythms may or may not be so systematized. And generally the systemic proceedings can be suddenly varied, or one dropped and another started; and I'm always open to discontinuity, and as I write I usually don't look back. Also I don't do sketches, just plunge in and try to follow where it's going.

...

I don't seem to have any general thoughts about this quartet music, except what I might say about any of my music - the openness to the performers, but not excluding quite specified writing. And always looking for new, or newly alive, sound - made somewhat by using a variety of the instruments' extended resources, but more by the way the music is put together, out of mostly familiar material, but surprisingly (to me too) put together, and with unfamiliar or unexpected intrusions here and there.

Actually, I might say too that the quartet writing I've done is involved with (but not in any deliberate or heavy way) undermining a bit, or look at differently, the established traditions of string quartet writing.

The String Quartets of Christian Wolff

In 2008, Wolff composed his most recent quartet, the 40-minute “For 2 Violinists, Violist and Cellist”, responding once again to a request: this time from MaerzMusik in Berlin for the Bozzini Quartet. In rigorously exploring every possible combination within this instrumentation (solo, duo, trio, quartet), and by freely moving between coordinated, measured and indeterminately combined notations, Wolff gently but strictly questions the monolithic ensemble “string quartet”. Instead he reminds us again that music can simply be, as much a heterogeneous patchwork quilt of individual voices sounding in a shared space, the everyday, as the magical possibility of a utopian coexistence.

[music: “For 2 Violinists, Violist and Cellist” (2008) to close].

Each note = one sound. Play in way indicated, freely within the time space. Durations free (including beyond time space), pitch, dynamics free.

All four players play from the same score, except as indicated for B.

A

	5" →			3" →			5" →		
normal									
extra bow pressure									
spiccato, light									
sul tasto									
sul pont.									
battuto									
battuto col legno									
col legno tratto									

1'04"

Handwritten musical score for "For 2 Violinists, Violist and Cellist" by Christian Wolff. The score is written on four staves: VL.1, VL.2, VC., and VLA. The tempo is marked as "♩ = c. 80". Above the first staff, there are handwritten notes: "Tutti: NON VIBRATE" and "325". Above the second staff, there is a handwritten note: "330". The VLA staff has a handwritten note: "Tempo (1) Ad Lib." and "VLA. PROCEEDS INDEPENDENTLY". The score is handwritten and includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Ex. 4: two excerpts from score of "For 2 Violinists, Violist and Cellist"

* * *

The Formalist Quartet has recently recorded Christian Wolff's music for string quartet for the label Populist Records (Los Angeles).

Wolff Live UdK Berlin Formalist Quartet

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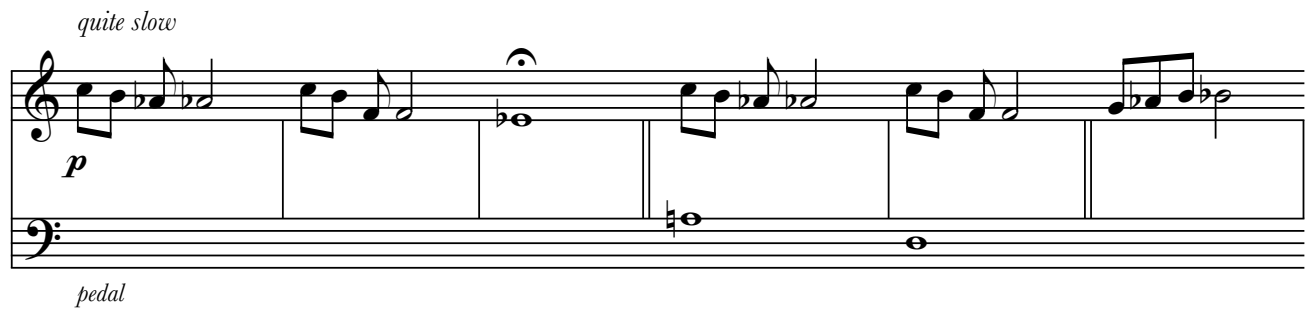
C. Wolff

Michael Pisaro

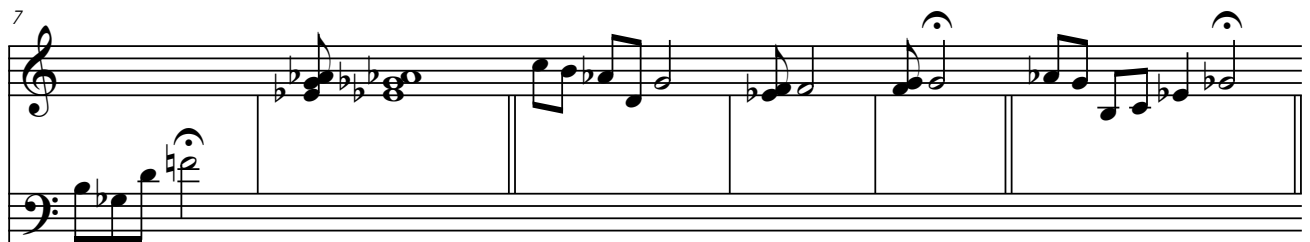
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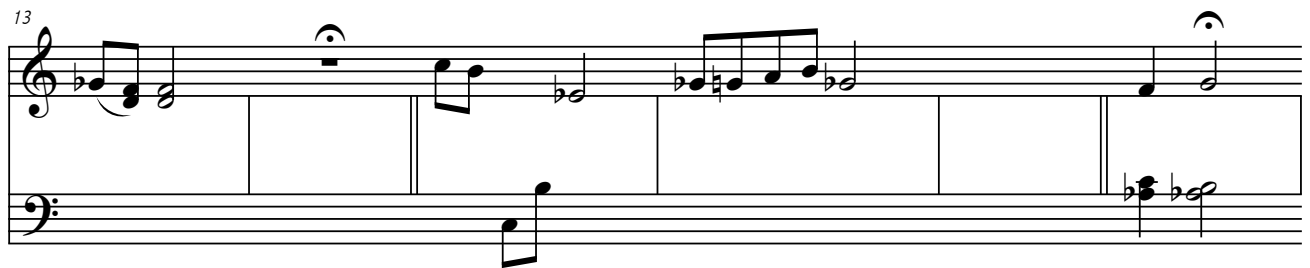
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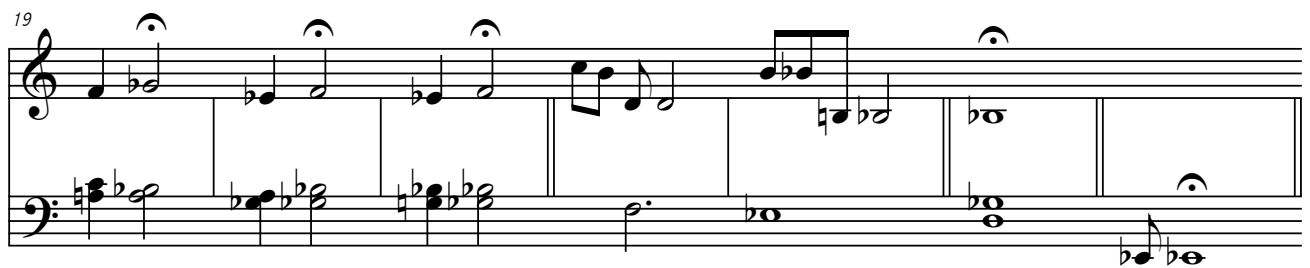
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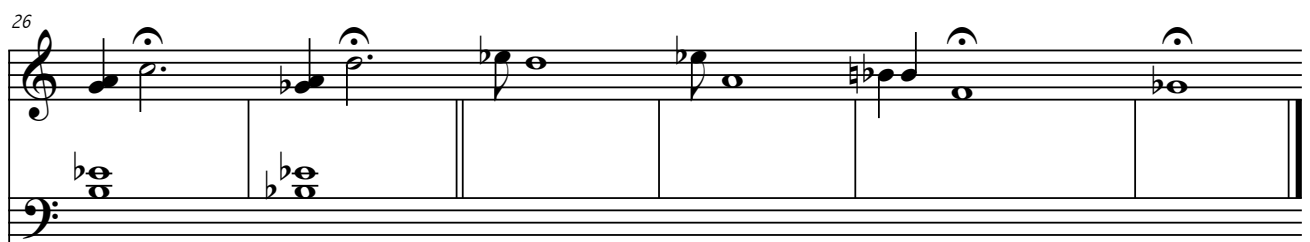
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26



Six strings, ten fingers and the heterophonic ideal: Some thoughts on Christian Wolff's recent guitar music

Larry Polansky

VI

Christian Wolff has a long, intimate and fascinating musical association with the guitar, especially the electric. He has played guitar, bass, and even a bit of banjo, and collaborated with a number of guitarists (such as Keith Rowe and myself). Christian has a deep sense of what is possible, and what is imaginable for the instrument. The guitar, in its amplified and non-amplified form, is essential to American (and other) vernacular musics. Christian knows and frequently alludes to vernacular genres, especially folk music, in his work, in a manner that I would call indiscernible quotation.

In 1966, Morton Feldman famously wrote a piece for Christian, which he played on several occasions. Feldman's "The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar" was long lost, but recently found. In the meantime it has been the fascinating subject of various homages, replacements, and speculation¹. Christian's own series of pieces, *Electric Spring* 1–3, from the late 60s, are also important early experiments in inviting the instrument into the contemporary repertoire. In *Spring* 3 he introduces the electric guitar's various physical and electronic enhancements such as "vibrato" or "tremolo" bar (pitch, not loudness change), amplifier "vibrato" (loudness modulation), and fuzz tones. Christian still plays electric bass, almost always table- or piano-top.

I have been lucky to be Christian's friend, colleague and collaborator for some 20 years, working together at Dartmouth, and living close to each other in Vermont/New Hampshire. A large part of our musical relationship has been through performance, often informally around Dartmouth, and frequently on the road with our *Trio* (with pianist Kui Dong), and with various ensemble configurations formed to play Christian's music. Based on the latter, and on my experiences performing Christian's two solo electric guitar pieces, I offer some thoughts on his recent **compositions** for the instrument.

The recent music discussed in this essay is (reverse chronological order):²

Going West. Solo electric guitar (2013)

Quintet. 2 percussion, electric guitar, piano, contrabass (other arrangements possible) (2009)

Quartet for Frederic, Larry, Michael, Robyn. bass clarinet, electric guitar, piano (other instrumental arrangements possible) (2005-2007)

Another Possibility. Solo electric guitar (2004)

The earlier pieces for guitar are: *Electric Spring* 1–3 (1966, 1966-70, 1967); a solo piece for electric bass; *Rukus* (1990); and *Flutist and Guitarist* (1993). I have not performed any of these, but they contain important ideas, germane to the newer pieces.

¹ <http://www.cnvill.net/mfpossibility.pdf>, and <http://www.cnvill.net/mflarryp.htm>

² I won't discuss two other recent ensemble works — *Basel* and *Spring Three* — in this essay. They are both fascinating, but the techniques I'm considering are either absent from them or, as in the case of heterophonic forms, exemplified by other pieces.

Christian's music is rarely (thankfully) "idiomatic" for the guitar. It seldom refers to, depends upon, or even acknowledges guitar techniques, or whatever musical genres a player might have learned or be familiar with. In my case, those genres are almost entirely non-classical. In all of his music, Christian is reticent to supply expression markings, articulations, dynamics, and so on. There's not much to go on, regarding how one should "sound." In guitar music this can be especially interesting.

Until recently, it was generally assumed that performers of his music, with some notable exceptions, were classically trained. But many guitarists who play contemporary music (especially those of my generation in the United States) come from diverse musical backgrounds, and are comfortable in a number of vernacular traditions. Classical guitar might be, in fact, the repertoire and technique with which guitarists today are least familiar. When playing Christian's guitar music, one problem, or challenge for guitarists is how and when to refer sonically and technically to their own background (or not). I don't mean "genre" here — one wouldn't lapse into a heavy-metal, bluegrass or jazz version of some indeterminate passage. Instead, the music reminds the guitarist of the fundamental concept of two hands with five fingers on strings and wood.

Context is important. I might play in a different way in duet with Robyn Shulkowsky than with Frederic Rzewski. The electric guitar, in ensemble situations, can be a technical polyglot, whereas most other musicians have a clear first sonic language. Lately, more and more players from other traditions are performing Christian's music (an extraordinary example of this is the drummer Joey Baron). This is a good thing, engendering a multi-linguistic interpretation of his elemental musical ideas.

What makes this possible is Christian's avoidance of "style," as well as his avoidance of "rhetoric." The electric guitar's sonic flexibility allows it to fit in with an ensemble in a variety of ways: there is no single "conventional" sound. Generally, though, he wants things simple, abstract, clear, and devoid of gimcrackery: no rock or jazz gewgaws, no folksy relics. I never use electronic pedals except for volume pedal in his pieces; I try to let the instrument sound like fingers on wood and frets, rendered audible by transducers and an amplifier.

Christian's compositional methods often end up producing effects that can't be played as written on the instrument: chords, notes off the instrument, simultaneous lines for which one would need both an extra right and left hand to play accurately. But as in much of Christian's other music, the guitar pieces have a difficult and fertile tension between what is technically usual and what is technically new, between what is musically imagined and what is impossible to play.

V

One doesn't have to search beyond the opening of *Another Possibility* for a good example of the latter. The first thing a guitarist encounters makes for what I'd call a "What the hell...?" moment. The score states: "Chords that are 'impossible' to play: consider one or more of the notes as grace notes preceding the rest of the notes." Even so, it's a bit of a surprise to encounter this in the first chord. How to do it? The challenge defines the player as an impulse function defines a resonance. Some guitarists roll it as a lovely arpeggio. My approach is to embrace the impossibility, calling in the first responders. I usually play it as a ringing three part chord (F#-D-E) and grab the C# with the right hand (RH), plucking and stopping it. This postulates other possibilities for playing what comes later. I say "usually," because I always

do these pieces differently. The object is to exploit, in performance, the ambiguities of the score. These ambiguities are an exhortation to explore new sounds, fingerings, and gestures.



Example 1: *Another Possibility*, first line

The next two chords of *Another Possibility* are idiomatic and seductively easy. Performers seem to “dig in” to the third, 16th note figure, perhaps channeling their inner surf-guitarist. The 4th event (G-B-A-Bb-E) allows for a choreographic return: for the notes to sustain together the RH must be liberated from its usual over-the-pickups exile. *Another Possibility* and *Going West* (and all the pieces) are full of similar examples. Christian writes the chords he wants, playable or not. The performer is not just encouraged but forced to become a more creative musician.

The tension between the quotidian and the unexpected is fundamental to Christian’s aesthetic. The remainder of *Another Possibility*’s first line is just as much fun. The next task is to hold down the white notes in the lower beamed figure while the intervening black notes are played. It’s wonderfully doable, in various ways, and each approach will sound different and elucidate the guitarist’s personality. I like to get the high C-natural with my right hand, as well as the last Ab, referring physically and sonically to the opening. Again, this is anti-idiomatic, and thus (maybe) progressive. In working out these alternatives after considering a number of them, you feel more like a collaborator and less like an interpreter.

These technical questions all appear in the *first line* of a 12-minute piece. They are typical of the kinds of choices offered. The more I play Christian’s music, and the more I play with him, the more I think of the guitar music (and, by extension all of his music), as a Rorschach test of a musician’s intelligence, creativity, integrity, and chops. The pieces are an ecology that rewards mutations and speciation.

IV

A pervasive idea in Christian’s music is the continuum between monophony and heterophony. This idea manifests itself in an unusual way in the guitar music. In all of his pieces there are passages that sound either distinctly homophonic, monophonic, polyphonic, or heterophonic. He likes to explore these textures, and to find interesting ways of getting from one to the other. Many of his pieces show a clear formal movement among levels of heterophony, and between monophony and heterophony (and everything in between). Performers play in various groupings and hierarchies of rhythmic synchrony and independence, and combinations of the two. They must interpret neutral clefs, speed up and slow down in various non-coordinated ways, come together for lovely little rounds and chorales, play 2-, 3- and n-part counterpoints that sound like Fux translated into Martian and back, and play things together that are in no way played together (there must be a word for this, but I can’t think of one). His music joyously reflects the history of polyphonic styles through a mirror that’s been broken into a million pieces and hand-glued back together. In the guitar pieces these ideas radically transform the way in which we think of the guitar.

Christian often notates simultaneous independent lines to achieve various forms of “-phony” in the guitar pieces. In the two solo pieces there are short but challenging passages of this (more on these below). In *Quartet*... there are more extended examples, which are less challenging from a technical perspective, and not as exposed. But they are also much longer, and because the guitar is part of the ensemble, rhythmic execution is critical. *Quintet* contains only a brief passage of 2-part writing, written in two staves (Section V, n. 13–18³). This is intended as a contribution to the gentle multi-voice polyphonic texture (and could have been written in one staff).

Guitarists often play multiple-lined polyphonic (but not usually heterophonic) parts, in various musical styles. This has even become a new form of virtuosity in the last 20–30 years with tapping, various right hand techniques and the integration of moving bass lines under chordal and melodic playing as in jazz (making 7- and 8-string guitars more common). It also occurs in a lot of contemporary composed music for guitar.

We often practice music in more than one staff, reading through piano music or even string quartets (why not, in fact, orchestral pieces?) in some guitar-centric reduction ad absurdum to improve reading and fingerboard chops. We play things in various clefs for the same reason, and in lots of different tunings (not to mention instruments like mandolin, banjo, et al). But aside from the other instruments and tunings, we’re seldom asked to do much of this in contemporary “art music” pieces (aside from reading bass clef, à la Schoenberg’s writing in the *Serenade*, in which the guitar transposition is made transparent).

When Christian uses multiple staves (and clefs) and/or multiple lines in the same staff (or sometimes 4 lines in 2 clefs), it’s because he’s intrigued by the idea of turning a conventionally monophonic or homophonic instrument into a heterophonic one. He writes two or three independent lines (in *Going West*, five lines) and multiple staves (in *Going West*, three staves) in order to more clearly notate a complex musical passage that, when played by an instrument that doesn’t comfortably do this, becomes something entirely different. The guitar is pressed into service as a noisy filter composed of fingers, strings and frets. It is played against its grain. By explicitly ignoring the guitar’s predilections in these passages, Christian achieves something both significant and beautiful.

It’s not the same thing as a composer who notates three staves for piano in order to clarify the counterpoint, or make the part easier to read. And neither are Christian’s multi-stave/ multi-line passages reductions. The guitarist’s *job* is to do the reduction. Christian is *thinking* heterophonically, writing multiple parts and letting the chips fall where they may. It’s a musical idea unfettered by the meager resources of our fingers, hands, strings and tunings.

III

The *Quartet*... and *Quintet*... are explicitly written for a highly selected group of musicians, including himself. Accordingly, these pieces are technically demanding. But most of the multiple stave work in these pieces is in the ensemble. Consequently, the material is less “soloistic” than in *Another Possibility* or *Going West*, but is no less challenging and interesting.

In Section III of the *Quartet*... each instrument plays “independently allowing any and various degrees of overlap between each other.” This section is a good example of his formal use of the apposition of monophony and heterophony, and the movement from one to

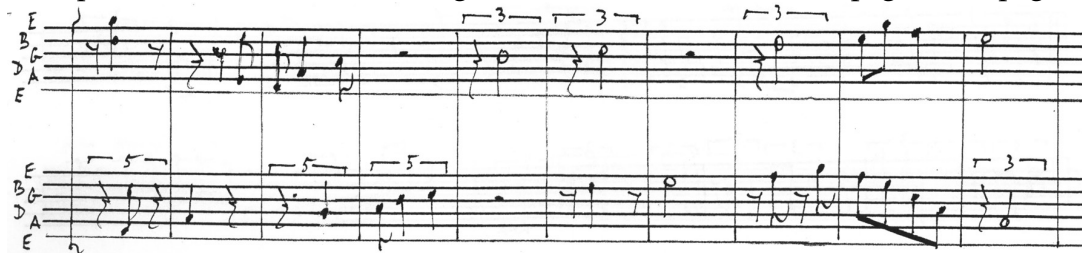
³ In Christian’s pieces “measure number” isn’t always a precisely meaningful term. He often refers to them as “rehearsal numbers.” For simplicity, I use the abbreviation “n.” here.

another, in what could be called (in one direction) *cumulative heterophony*: new melodic lines are added to a texture over time.

The guitar part, two pages long, begins with a solo melodic line, the first page (half) of which has a kind of ABA structure distinguished by contour complexity, which in this case might be called *implied heterophony* (analogous to the term *implied polyphony*, commonly used to describe an aspect of Bach's solo string writing). The first and third sections (of this page) are characterized by melodies with large chromatic leaps alternating with repeated note phrases, and a simple passage in semi-determinate tablature (which might result in any number of textures; more on this below). The second "half" of the solo is all in tablature notation and adds a staff (and a second musical line), becoming 2-part, rhythmically independent (albeit sparse), heterophony. One could argue that the juxtaposition of repeated notes with the thornier melodies and tablature passages is Christian's way of having different polyphonic ideas in the context of a single instrument, which is itself embedded in a heterophonic quartet of instruments all doing similar kinds of things on their own. In a sense, this section is a complete heterophonic piece with individual parts that contain varying levels of that same heterophony, all made unpredictable by the independence and freedom within each part.



Example 2a, *Quartet...*, Section III, guitar solo, final two lines first page (score page nine)



Example 2b: *Quartet...*, Section III, middle line (two staves, tablature notation) of second page (score page ten)

Section IV is a quartet in notated rhythm (except for the piano, and free coda). The guitar begins in two staves, in three simple and sparse heterophonic lines. It thins out to two lines, and then to one, ending in a lovely passage (n. 28–70, moving to one line at n. 48) which is not only surprisingly playable and idiomatic for the guitar, but seems to lie within a gamut of G-mixolydian (absent a tonal center) for the whole ensemble. Section V, two independent duets: (guitar/piano, bass clarinet/percussion), opens with a strictly notated 2-line/2-stave passage for guitar and piano, in highly coordinated counterpoint, both within the two parts and between them. This is complicated in performance by a simultaneous but independent duet in the bass clarinet and percussion. This highly ordered polyphony (guitar and piano) is followed by: a pair of solos, one for each instrument; a beautiful tremolo-ed homophonic section (n. 44); a 2-stave independently-proceeded-through passage; and, finally, another strictly written duet for piano and guitar, antiphonal in nature, with the bottom staff composed entirely of 16th notes on varying beats (occasionally in rhythmic unison but most

often not), with the top staves of both guitar and piano consisting of half-notes in the 2/4 meter. The coda is a 1-line melody, once again alternating between wide leaps and repeated notes, with the indication “Both play, start together, then free. Read any clef; gt. At concert pitch”.⁴ Section VI opens with a rich, chromatic, homophonic 24-measure chorale for the four players, strictly notated. “Each player chooses independently which line or changing lines to play. Guitar and piano can play any number of lines simultaneously as they decide (percussion too).” I’ve always liked it that Christian thought of the guitar as being on equal polyphonic footing with the piano in that sentence. As the chorale progresses, it becomes more heterophonic, often returning to the repeated note idea, until at n. 25 it changes to free rhythm, any clef (still 4-part). This is followed by a sparse coda, beginning at n. 26, with two lines, two staves (again, any player any clef).

The point of this blow-by-blow is that it describes how different polyphonic textures, and the movement between them, is a formal fundamental in Christian’s music. Heterophony — multiple ideas happening freely at the same time guided by common principles — is an ideal in his work, one that he explores tirelessly and thoughtfully. He is well known for his pioneering work in the ways musicians relate to each other. Similarly, the various polyphonic genera describe how “sounds” may relate to each other. Compositional genera may or may not be correlated to performance ones. Heterophonic sounds may occur as a result of what one might call, by analogy, homophonic or even monophonic behavior, and vice versa. The performance behaviors in a piece such as *for 1, 2, or 3 People* could be said to be antiphonal (“you play after I do”), or heterophonic (“we play the same thing at the same time but independently”), *independent* of the musical resultant. Polyphony is not even restricted to the number of voices; monophonic textures (in time) like the return to repeated notes in the *Quartet*, assure sonic coherence — homophony or controlled polyphony — that arises even when players’ behaviors are independent (heterophonic). The score, sound, and performer action can form larger heterophonic organisms.

II

The solo pieces contain extreme instances of heterophonic guitar writing. In *Another Possibility*, there are two multiple-line passages, both written in a single staff. The first is at n. 56, and the second at n. 92 (with a 1-measure 2-staff detour). The first passage begins simply in a glorious 2-part chorale-like texture, with clear bass and melodic line. The bottom line, for the first four measures, consists of alternating Ds and Gs, suggesting open strings, and a resonant, modal, strangely archaic sound (except for the m9th in the second measure). This passage fits beautifully on the guitar, almost, one might say, idiomatically (I don’t know if this is intended). It’s so much fun to play that I feel a little guilty, and remind myself not to overdo it.

⁴ The way that Christian’s guitar music, in ensemble context, deals with guitar transposition is an interesting topic, and often a challenge for the guitarist (especially, in my experience, in the *Exercises*, the performance of which merits another essay entirely). When to transpose, when not to? The music is generally forgiving, open to various sonic solutions, and he usually doesn’t specify. But when he does indicate “concert pitch” it must be assumed that he really wants it. It is all the more peculiar then that the passage in question (end of Section V) has a “25th fret” F natural in it, which must be played, on any guitar I have, as an artificial harmonic, by retuning (up) the E string, or by “just bending the high E” (thanks to Nick Didkovsky for pointing this out). Or perhaps this passage reveals Christian’s secret love for heavy-metal guitar...



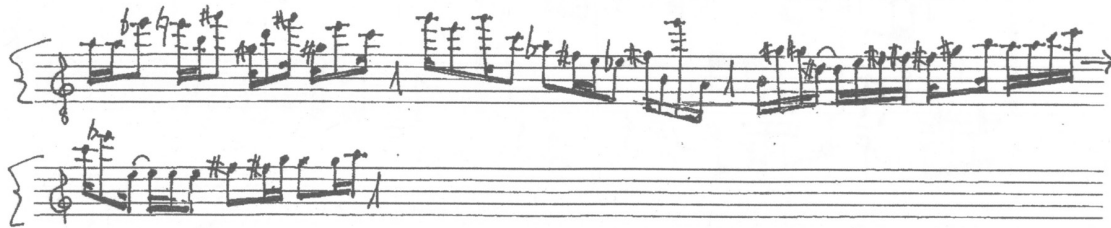
Example 3: *Another Possibility*, first seven measures of first heterophonic passage (n. 57 – 63)

No such temptation occurs in the second 2- (and occasionally 3-) voice passage. The leaps and stretches in the first two measures remind you that you're back on whatever terra firma Christian stands on. This passage includes various embedded polyrhythms and its share of impossibilities (such as the dyad consisting of the lowest Ab on the instrument (VI string) and the highest G (I string), in n. 110). In my experience, and in talking to other players who've performed *Another Possibility*, these passages require a disproportionate amount of practice. On the other hand, they're also a lot of fun. The multiple lines, unlike the first of the two passages, don't "fit" together. This is, of course, the idea.



Example 4: *Another Possibility*, n. 104 – 111

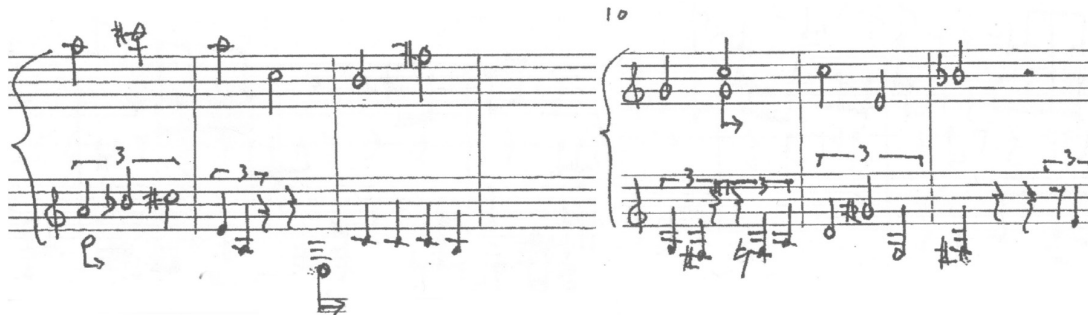
Going West, the most recent guitar piece (as far as I know) and the second of the two solo pieces, is the clearest example of cumulative heterophony. The entire piece moves steadily from one to five lines over the course of the short work. It ends, characteristically, with a short single line coda. It begins with a short high register, leaping chromatic line (as usual, alternating with repeated and "almost" repeated notes).



Example 5: *Going West*, first section (three phrases)

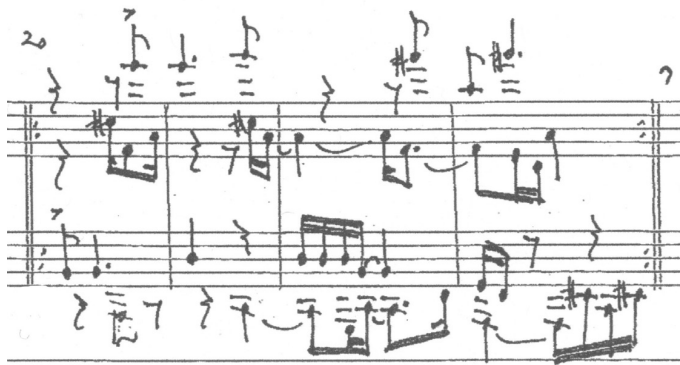
This *Going West* melody is followed by a monophonic — uncharacteristically guitaristic — gradually ascending passage. Beginning in the lowest register, mostly on the VI string, it uses all but one (i.e., I) of the open strings as sustained accompaniment. Next, this becomes what one might call "two independent melodies with accompaniment," again using open strings (two staves).

Six Strings



Example 6: *Going West*, second section (two staves), first six measures (n. 7 – 12)

By this point, Christian has built a 3-voice heterophonic texture. At n. 20, the piece enters a 4-voice heterophonic guitar section. The degree of difficulty changes precipitously at the double bar: this passage is more complex than any I know of in his guitar music.

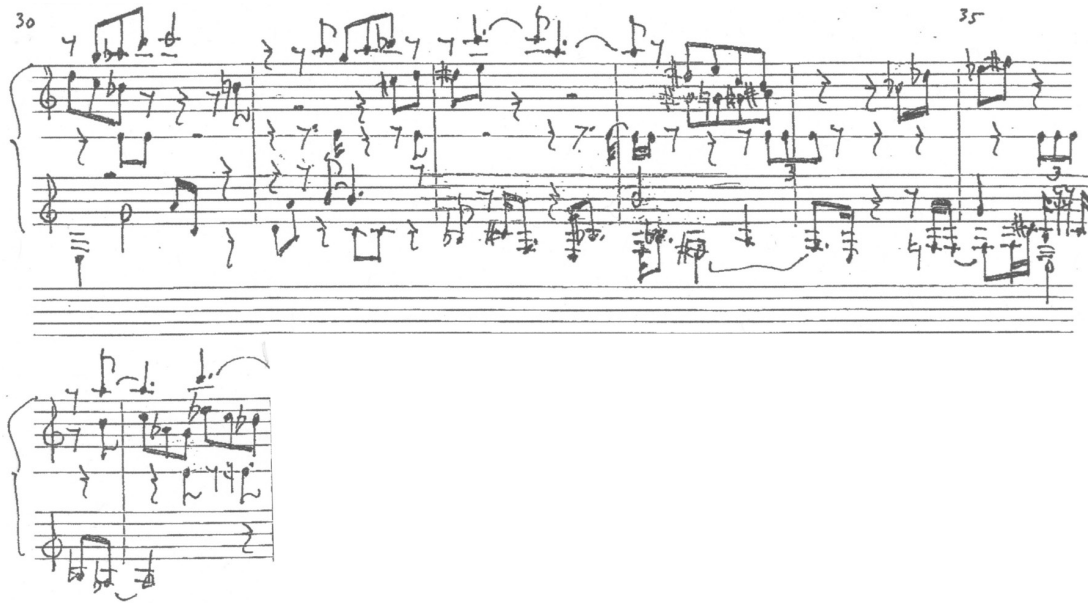


Example 7: *Going West*, second page, first four measures (repeated, n. 20 –

25)

Finally, at n. 28, after the 8-measure four-voice passage (of which Example 7 is the first half), another heterophonic voice is added on a single line between staves: 5-voice heterophony. This new line may consist of any sounds.⁵

⁵ In the premiere, I used a small sound palate of toys and percussion instruments taped to a plastic cutting board at my feet. I could also have used my voice, or even some other sounds on the guitar (though the fingers are already pretty busy). One of the instruments I intended to use was a Vietnamese *song loan* —a foot operated struck slit wood-block. These are hard to find, and mine broke (after heavy practice usage) the day of the performance (it sounded great in rehearsal!). I previewed *Going West* for a small class of graduate students, who said that in the section with foot percussion, I moved around so much and so fast that they were afraid I was going to fall. I decided to sit down in performance.



Example 8: *Going West* (n. 30 – 36)

This next section is complex and daunting, but after a while it becomes a kind of guitar drug. Some compromises need to be made, many of the notes can not be sustained to full value, but the polyrhythms, multiple lines and leaps stretch the brain and hands. I tried re-notating this passage in order to limit the cognitive load to one staff, to see if it might become easier to read and learn. That wasn't the case. Christian's notation is efficient and well-considered. There's too much information for one staff, and three staves clarify both the performance and the musical idea.

Going West moves methodically from one to five voices, its heterophonic form explicit and transparent. Christian seems to be using this idea more and more in recent pieces⁶, which, like *Going West*, explore its extreme possibilities. And, as in some of the other works discussed, *Going West* ends in a short monophonic passage, idiomatic and bluesy, a kind of "welcome to your new home" after a short but difficult journey.

I

Another musical/notational idea in the guitar music is the use of a kind of tablature. In three pieces (*Flutist and Guitarist*, *Another Possibility*, and *Quartet...*). Christian notates the strings independently in six lines, a system that allows for rhythmic precision and semi-indeterminate pitch. I believe he does this for the first time in *Flutist and Guitarist*. The most challenging example is in the extraordinary ending of *Another Possibility*.

In these passages Christian treats the guitar as a physical, acoustic and geographical tabula rasa, not as a repository of repertory and specific technique. For Christian, Cage, and others of later generations this is a powerful and urgent forward orchestrational step. Naturally and

⁶ Wolff (personal communication) points to the piece *Robert*, 2010, for minimum of five instruments, as a clear and early example of this idea. Dedicated to Robert Swinston of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, it was inspired by a similar technique in one of Cunningham's dances, in which Swinston danced the solo part, and which may have been the last dance in which Cunningham himself danced.

inexorably, maybe even happily, it has opened up possibilities that avoid conventional instruments entirely. The beauty of this kind of “experimental tablature” is that sounds are notated directly as the result of physical actions, unmediated by conventional notation.

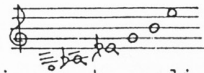
In Christian’s case there is also a nice pun at work. Many guitarists, especially younger guitarists, can’t even read conventional notation. Several generations have grown up learning tablature, mainly heavy-metal, rock, jazz and folk transcriptions. Oddly, and somewhat ironically, this gives them something in common with “guitar” players from hundreds of years ago. The trend to tablature postdates my own development. In an odd generational divide, I don’t read conventional guitar tablature very well.

Christian’s tablature is simple in terms of pitch: only a few categories are used (open string, stopped string, or harmonic). But these passages can be extremely difficult from a rhythmic standpoint: unlike conventional tablature they represent six independent musical lines, not a melody or series of chords distributed among the strings. I imagine Christian saying to himself: “They’ve got six strings after all, why do they need to play together?”

In *Flutist and Guitarist*, there’s a fourteen-measure solo passage 6-string / line tablature notation near the end (with an optional, quiet, non-notated flute part). The guitarist retunes two of the strings (approximately, to neighboring quarter-tones), and plays open strings (notated on the line), stopped strings (notated above the line), and harmonics (diamond-shaped notes). Simple rhythms and a free, moderate tempo (quarter \approx 80) render it easily played, almost sight-readable. And unless one plays an open string that was supposed to be stopped there are no wrong notes.

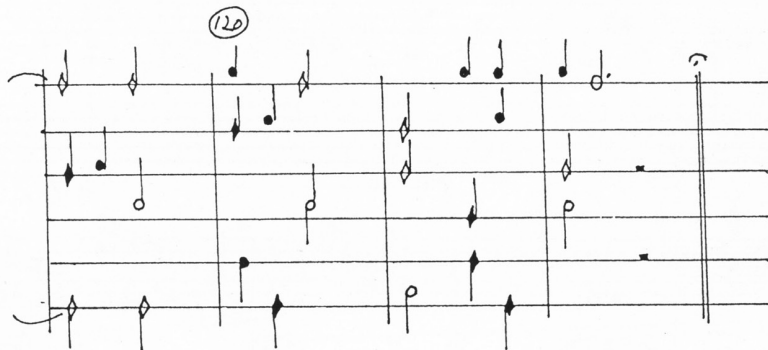
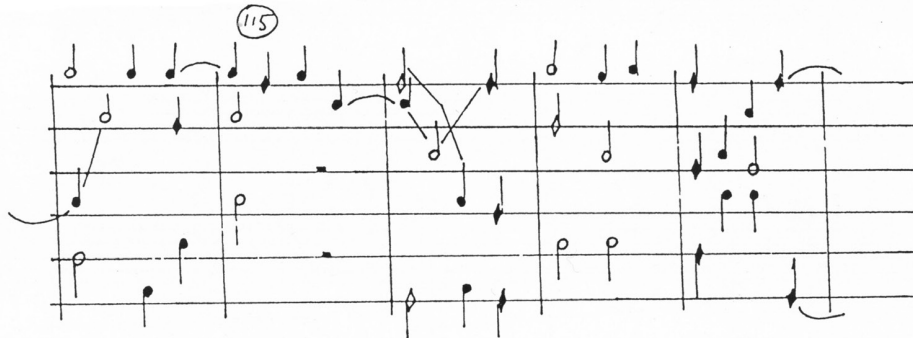
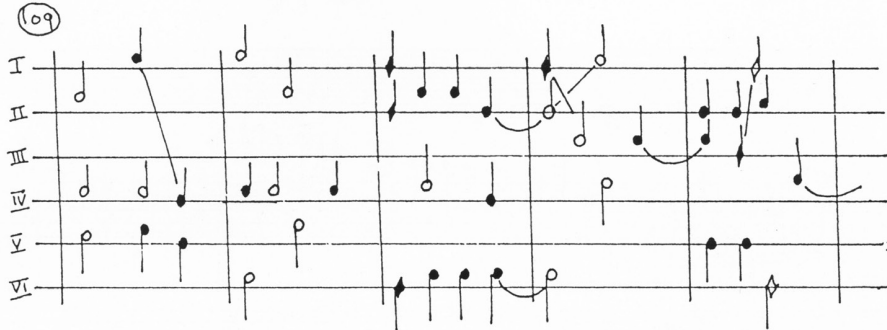
page 6

guitar re-tune (e^b and a^b about $\frac{1}{4}$ tone or less lower):



Each line = string; note on line = play that (open) string; note above line = play any higher note on that (stopped) string; diamond-shaped notes = produce harmonic

(Optional: flute may quietly, intermittently, as best she can, "track" one (any, changing) of the guitar voices.)



continue directly
on bottom of page 5;
guitar stays tuned
as is, pitches to
sound as written
except for micro-
tonal lowering

Example 9: Flutist and Guitarist tablature

The ending of *Another Possibility* is another matter entirely. There are two repeated sections: eleven measures of 4/4 at (tempo) mm. 62, and twelve measures of 2/4 at mm. 76. Open strings are on the line now, stopped strings above (harmonics not mentioned). In *Flutist and*

Six Strings

Guitarist the texture is more or less homophonic, like a chorale. In *Another Possibility* it's heterophonic—a complex, 6-voice string-string combat. There are beat filling hockets, polyrhythms, and a dance-like independence in the right hand. It's like a 6-part score for indeterminate percussion instruments, and a gas to play.

The first section is slower but more difficult than the second. The latter always feels like a reward, a little fiddle tune to end the piece. I always feel a sense of relief and wonder when I'm done. I know it's possible, and I've played it often, but I'm a little astonished that I did it.

$\text{♩} = 62.64$ *quasi*

130

135 $\text{♩} = 76$

140

Play at strings indicated. Notes on line = that open string. Notes above line = any higher, fingered, note on that string (always variable). Repetitions are optional. If taken, may, of course, use different fingered notes.

Example 10: *Another Possibility*, first page of tablature section (my marked-up score), (n. 125 – 140)

This passage has interested me in another way since I began playing it. Should one learn it in a specific, note-determined way, or more generally? More to the point, should it be improvised in performance?

Improvisation is essential in Christian's music. His notations are often precise and demanding in certain respects while leaving a great deal to the musician in others. He is intentional, explicit and imaginative about getting musicians to think and play in new ways, not just "interpret" however thoughtfully, even insightfully or inventively. As he points out in his interview with Walter Zimmermann in *Desert Plants*:

"... my music is often just material. But not raw material exactly. It's set up in such a way as to require anyone who wants to seriously deal with it to exert themselves in a particular way. Not just technically, to learn how to play it, but also imaginatively ... how to fill out what's to be filled out, how to use the material. And so that's just the individual in relation to the score."⁷

Improvisation is not only comfortable for me (and musicians who grew up playing vernacular musics rather than notated classical music), it's my natural mode. It was clear to me that I should *not* work this passage out ahead of time, or renote it determinately. Some performers do the latter, and there's ample historical precedent for this approach.

But I like improvising. It's central to my performance of *Another Possibility* and the other music of Christian's that I play. In *Another Possibility* phrasing, fingerings, sounds, tempi, and articulations are most often left to the player. Each of my performances is different from every other. And my own are quite different, for example, from those of my friend and frequent collaborator Giacomo Fiore (whose performances and recordings I admire). For one thing, I alternate between a pick and my fingers (but not nails), and Giacomo, trained in classical guitar, uses only his fingers (with nails). But there are many other more substantial differences as well. When to use open strings and let them ring (as in n. 7, 6, 51, and 56)? What string to use and how to articulate the low register phrases (as in n. 55, with its beautiful microtonal ideas, 76, and most interestingly, 123)? There are many intriguing choices throughout. Given the degree of performer freedom, it's hard to imagine ever falling into a rut with this piece.

I am inclined, as a general rule, to welcome freedom when offered, not turn it down. The tablature passages suggest *more* improvisation, not less. Playing the section spontaneously is exciting, at least for me, and maybe a little for the audience — working without a net. But it also makes learning the material hard: what exactly to practice?

The answer is simple, and generalizes to much of Christian's music: practice what you play. This is no different than jazz, or bluegrass, or any other form in which there are certain givens and certain non-givens. *You just play*, which is one way I've heard Christian describe his own improvisation. In playing, you learn the things that remain constant: rhythms, stringing, what kind of note to play on each string. Conversely, you try not to "learn" anything that

⁷ *Desert Plants: Conversations With 23 American Musicians* (1976). Thanks to Giacomo Fiore for reminding me of this almost 45 year old remark.

isn't given, focusing on how to create new ideas as you play, as in jazz.⁸ When practicing, you search for new possibilities.

Sometimes, for example, I intentionally use as much of the neck as possible in this section, until I find myself settling into clear patterns. I might reverse the intention — use as little of the neck as possible. Sometimes I use a wide variety of vibrato, bends, and slides. Sometimes almost none. In performance, I approach it fresh, with no idea of how to realize it. That idea arises in performance context and from my study of the piece on the guitar, not away from it.

Appendix: Notes on the Recent Pieces for Guitar

Another Possibility, 2004 was commissioned by the Dutch guitarist Wiek Hijmans, who premiered it. *Another Possibility* has since been played by a number of guitarists including myself (the American premiere, I believe, on a concert of Christian's music at Roulette, with Quintet 2). Giacomo Fiore has recently recorded it on his LP *iv: american electric guitars*, GFLP001, 2014. A video of a performance of mine is at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0eiS0IDITg>.

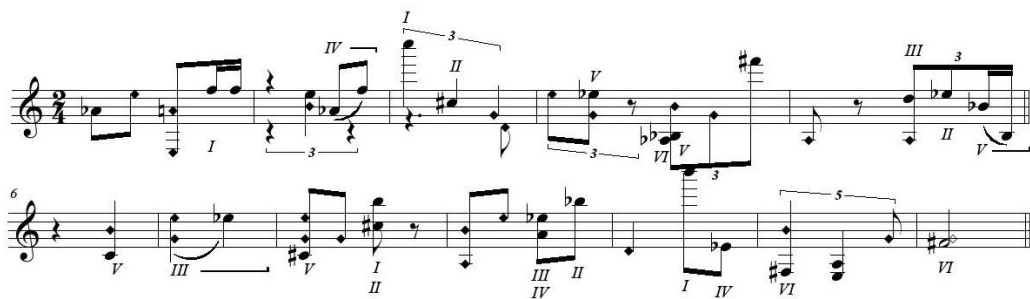
Quartet for Frederic, Larry, Michael, Robyn (2005–7) was written for a series of performances by Frederic Rzewski (piano), myself, Michael Reissler (bass clarinet), and Robyn Schulkowsky (percussion) in Madrid, Spain (February, 2008). To the best of my knowledge, *Quartet...* has only been performed twice, during one week in Madrid, by the eponymous ensemble.

Basel, 2008 was written originally for an ensemble in Switzerland. The American premiere was given at Roulette (April, 2008), on a concert of Christian's music (with him on piano) organized by Craig Shepard (who played trombone). The two guitarists were Marco Cappelli and myself, and the clarinetist was Jürg Frey, whose music for the same ensemble was also on the concert, along with Christian's *Microexercises*.

⁸ Still, as an experiment, and for pedagogical purposes, I made a determinate notation of this section:

Another Possibility

one possibility: last 14 measures



example "transcription," last 14 measures
diamond noteheads: open strings

Example 11: *Another Possibility*, realization of second tablature section (n. 136 – 149)

This is unwieldy, and I never seriously considered learning it, but it was an interesting experiment.

Quintet, 2009, 2 percussion, electric guitar, piano, contrabass (other arrangements possible) was written for a concert at Roulette (December, 2009), with Joey Baron (drums), Robyn Schulkowsky (percussion), Robert Black (bass), myself, and Christian playing piano. Close to an hour long, it was the second half of a concert. The first half consisted of two solo pieces (*Look, She Said*, played by Black, and *Another Possibility*, played by me). It was recorded for Roulette TV, and available at: <http://vimeo.com/10954656>. To the best of my knowledge, *Quintet* has not been played since.

Spring Three was written in 2011 for a concert at The Stone, New York City (June, 2011), shared by Christian and I, curated by New World Records. Christian and I decided to use the same ensemble/instrumentation, and each write pieces for that group, which consisted of Doug Perkins (percussion), Robert Black (bass), myself (guitar), Christian (piano). My piece was called *9 events* (*quartet for christian, doug, robert and me*)

Going West (2013) was written for me as a going-away present when I moved to California from my long time home in Hanover, New Hampshire. I premiered it in May 2014, on a solo recital in the Tangents Guitar Series in San Francisco, directed by Giacomo Fiore (I also played *Another Possibility* on that concert).

34 Chords
Christian Wolff in Hanover and Royalton

electric guitar

Larry Polansky
1995

34 Chords, Christian Wolff in Hanover and Royalton, is an "orchestration" of Morton Feldman's choral work *Christian Wolff In Cambridge* (1963), inspired by the famous "lost electric guitar piece" that Feldman wrote for Christian. *34 Chords...* was written to celebrate my friend and colleague's 25 years at Dartmouth College, and is dedicated to him with the greatest respect for his work and ideas.

Larry Polansky

34 CHORDS

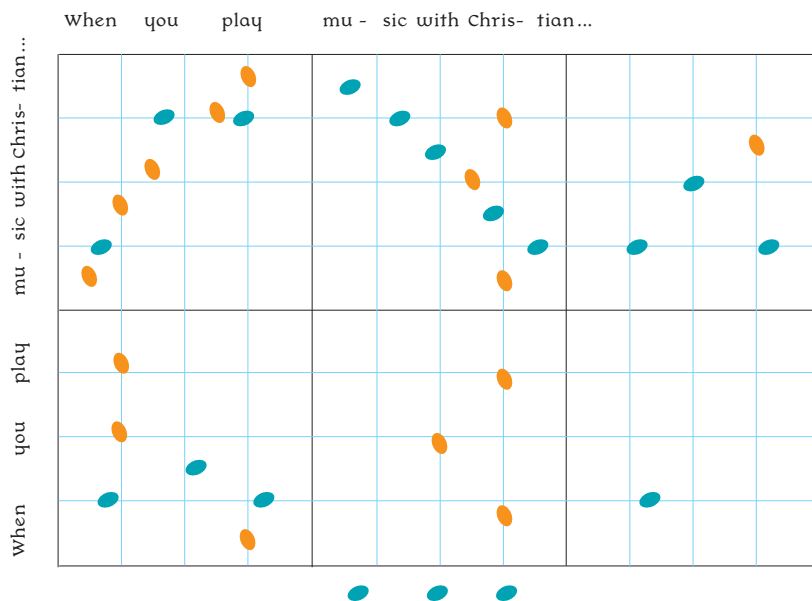
Christian Wolff in Hanover and Royalton

Solo electric guitar

Larry Polansky

Very soft. Mostly sul tasto. Very slow.

RH tap RH pluck
 Tune VI to D
 II (ossia: II)
 Bend down to F
 II
 ossia: lightly touch II at 12th fret, sounds 8va lower
 ppp RH pluck
 RH pluck
 LH pluck
 don't pluck
 VI (VI is G)
 Tune VI to D \flat
 Tune VI to G
 nat. art.
 tap don't tap vib.
 III IV
 II (ossia: III)
 V VI
 RH pluck
 ppp
 I
 Tune VI to G
 Tune VI to G \flat
 VI
 17
 VI (C \sharp)
 Tune VI to D
 (VI is D)
 II
 III
 V VI
 25
 RH art. harmonic
 V
 Tune VI to D \flat
 LH pluck w/ 1st finger
 Tune VI to D
 III I
 IV V
 VI (ossia: III)
 RH strum w/ 3rd or 4th finger
 same
 I
 II
 IV
 RH pluck
 31
 RH pluck
 V (ossia: II RH tap)
 VI
 Tune I to E \flat
 VI \flat
 (V)
 don't pluck (restrike lightly if necessary, or tap gently with LH)



When you play music with Christian sometimes you get questions before you answer.

CHRISTIAN MUSIC I

2- AND 4-PART ROUNDS

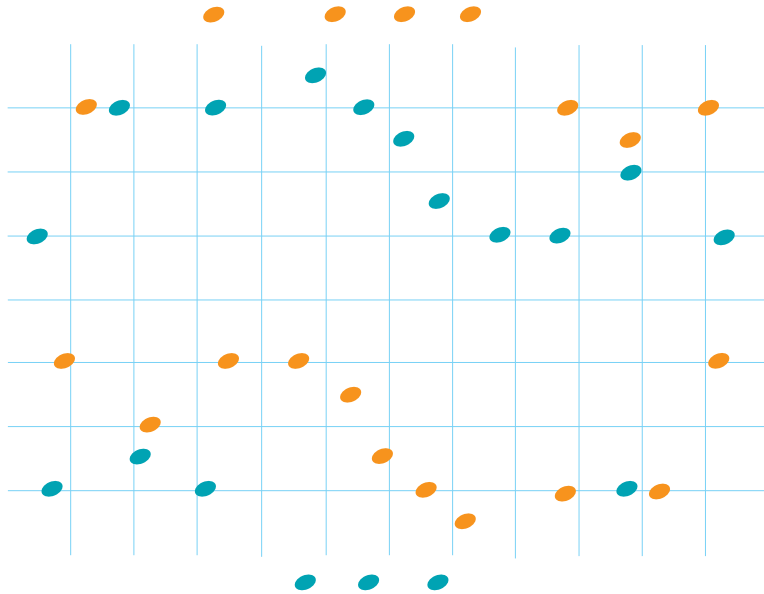
LARRY POLANSKY

DESIGN BY LAURA GREY

HANOVER, NEW HAMPSHIRE 2007

Christian Music

When you play
music with Christian
sometimes you get questions
before you answer.



When you play
music with Christian
sometimes you get answers
before you ask.

CHRISTIAN MUSIC II

2- AND 4-PART ROUNDS

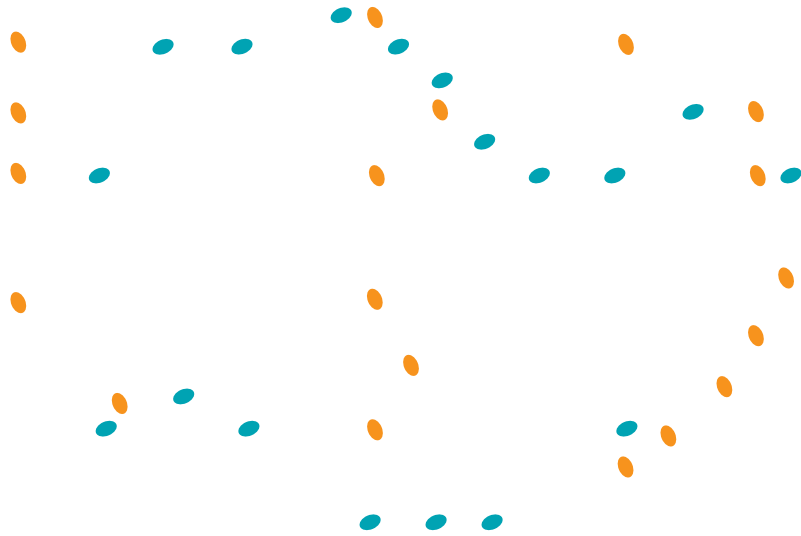
LARRY POLANSKY

DESIGN BY LAURA GREY

HANOVER, NEW HAMPSHIRE 2007

Larry Polansky

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CHRISTIAN MUSIC III

2- AND 4-PART ROUNDS

LARRY POLANSKY

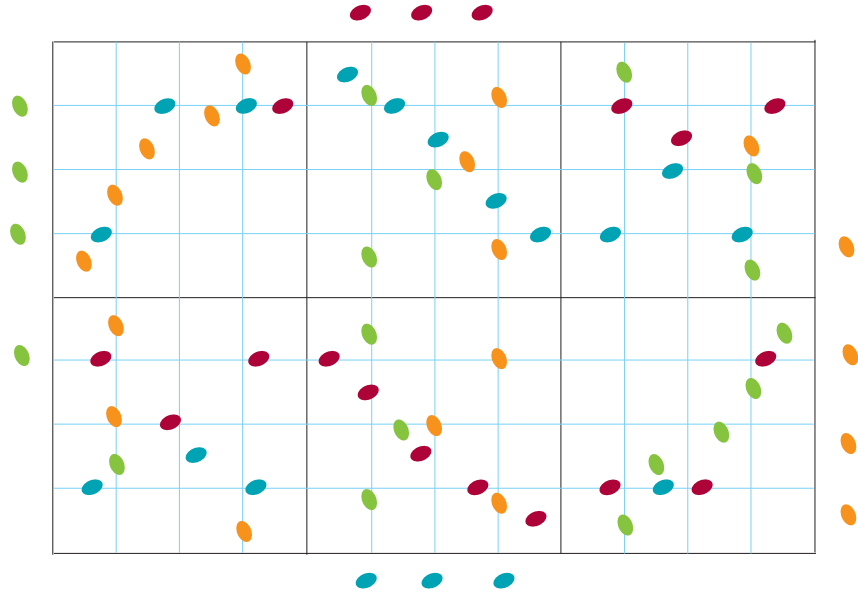
DESIGN BY LAURA GREY

HANOVER, NEW HAMPSHIRE 2007

Christian Music

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When you play
music with Christian
sometimes you get questions
before you answer.

When you play
music with Christian
sometimes you get answers
before you ask.

CHRISTIAN MUSIC IV 2- AND 4-PART ROUNDS

LARRY POLANSKY
DESIGN BY LAURA GREY
HANOVER, NEW HAMPSHIRE 2007

viiiity

polansky

A round for Chris-tian in the form of a waltz in four four.

That is to say his mu-sic and his does - n't al - ways do

what you ex - pect like LIFE! Here's to eight - y more!

3 part round

lp
santa cruz
3/8/14

Learning to Change with Christian Wolff's Music

Lucie Vítková

*"Music, through the way it is performed – possibly through the way it is presented, socially and in concert situations – becomes a kind of metaphor for social situations, suggests the kind of organizing of your thinking, your attitudes towards the world, which suggests that the world could be different."*¹

In 1963, the composition *Nine* (19) by Christian Wolff had its world premiere in Prague, played by the ensemble Musica Viva Pragensis under the baton of Czech composer Petr Kotík. It was the first time a Czech audience had an opportunity to hear Wolff's music. Despite the young age of the composer, Kotík was sure that the piece had potential and included it on the program. The composition had to wait until 1980 for its American premiere. Kotík continues to support Wolff's music and has commissioned him to write orchestral works for festivals in Ostrava (CZ) and New York. My first opportunity to hear Christian Wolff's music was a performance of his *Rhapsody for 3 Orchestras* at the Ostrava Days Festival in 2009. I found his music strange, very challenging to understand, and needed to discover a way to listen to it for myself. I crossed this threshold in my listening experience at the 2012 Beyond Cage Festival in New York. Hearing his new piece *individuals, collective* I entered a colorful and adventurous musical world; it was a captivating moment and has stayed with me ever since.

Change, Indeterminacy, Teaching, Noise and Freedom: these five features, always present and intersecting, are integral to how Christian Wolff approaches his music. *Change*, always bring something new and access the music differently every time; *indeterminacy*, give space for unexpected events in the music; *teaching*, show the player(s), by means of a score, his way of music-making and how to do things differently; *noise*, always part of his pieces equally beside pitched material; the notion of *freedom*, available to all participants in the musical event: the composer(s), the performer(s), the listener(s).²

In this article I focus on the notion of *teaching* in Wolff's pieces, considered in the context of free improvisation practice. By "free improvisation" I mean a kind of music that was evolving in the European context during the 1960s: ensembles such as Musica Elettronica Viva in Italy with Frederic Rzewski, Alvin Curran and Richard Teitelbaum or Scratch Orchestra with Cornelius Cardew and the AMM ensemble in England. This style is based on free musical interaction, with the aim of finding new ways of musical expression and form. The ensembles often worked with concepts

1 WOLFF, Christian. *Prof. Christian Wolff Lecture: Experimental Music*. VIDEO, London, 12th May 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3l6WwY4ftdI>, 22:30 – 23:00.

2 WOLFF, Christian. *Cues: Writings and Conversations*. Edition MusikTexte 005. Köln, Germany, 1998. ISBN 3-9803151-3-4, pp. 327-328.

which defined certain musical situations and players, and which sometimes included inviting the audience to contribute their sounds in pieces such as *Spacecraft* (1967)³ and *Sound Pool* (1969)⁴ by F. Rzewski or *Burdocks* (1970–71) written for the Scratch orchestra by Christian Wolff.

During his years of music-making Wolff has evolved various compositional techniques which emerge from social interactions of the players. These are notated by different means: invented symbols, instructions in the form of texts, and traditional music notation occur in various combinations. Alternate notations first appear in his works of the late 1950s, in pieces such as *Duo for Pianists I* (1957) and *Duo for Pianists II* (1958). Wolff's exploration of graphic and verbal scores continued to evolve over the next decade in pieces like *For 1,2 or 3 People* (1964), through his collaborations with the British ensembles Scratch Orchestra and AMM in the late 1960s and leading, in the early 1970s to the works *Prose Collection* (1968–71) and *Burdocks*.

I am researching his music not only by studying scores and writings, but most directly by *playing* it, working with many different people in a series of workshops I am organizing in various places, including Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Brno and Universität der Künste in Berlin. I bring together a group of people with various backgrounds: classical or jazz players, improvisers, musical amateurs or non-musicians with different levels of skill. I choose scores which are accessible to all of them, such as *For John/ Material* (2007), *Exercises* (1973–74), *Microexercises* (2006, 2007), *Nocturnes* (2007), *Grete* (2007), *Prose Collection* and recently some of his political works *Changing the System* (1973–74) and *Peace March 10* (2003), following Wolff's wish to make playing his music accessible, not just to elite groups who can read traditional notation, but even more so to the broadest possible range of people who want to make music.

Working on these projects, I have identified some of Wolff's techniques, particularly as demonstrated in the pieces *Exercises*, *Microexercises* and *For John/ Material* and these are my main starting point for further analysis. Some of these techniques were already introduced in earlier pieces, but *For John/ Material* is particularly suited for my practical use because the form of the piece is very open, allowing it to become a point of departure for working on improvisation with the ensembles. Wolff is an active improviser himself and certainly this practice has had an important impact on his composing. I would like to find the common aspects his works share with free improvisation and how his scores may be helpful for players who have never improvised. I am especially interested in working on musical communication with the group and the above-mentioned pieces have helped me find forms of *common speech* among the players.

FOR JOHN/ MATERIAL

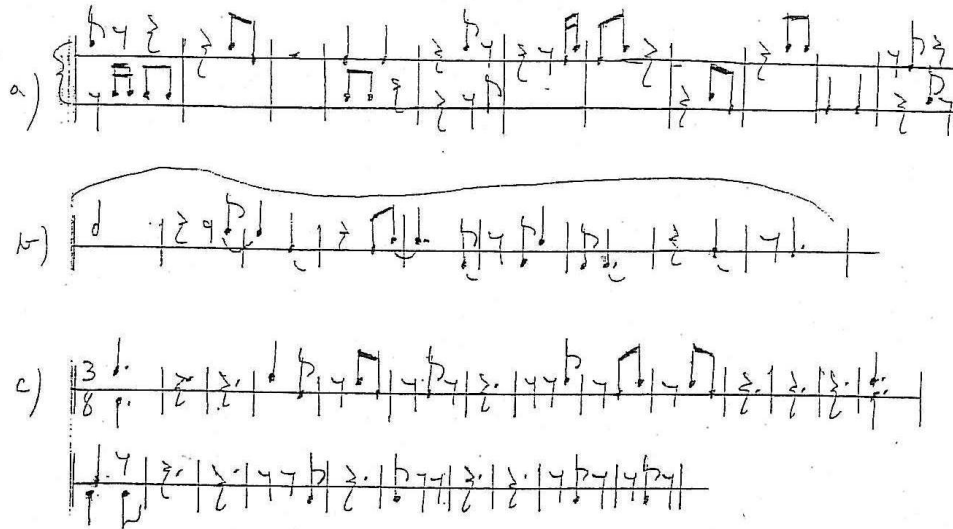
The piece *For John/ Material* for free instrumentation looks like a catalogue. On two pages there are different musical techniques marked with twelve letters from a) to l). The form of the piece is suggested in the text: "Play, at any time, any of the eleven items, a) through k), in any order. Any item can be (but need not be) repeated once, either immediately or after a longer time interval or after other items have been played. Any item can be omitted. When done with this, the twelfth item, l), may be played."

³ Published in one of the Larry Austin's *Source* magazine. Taken from: RZEWSKI, Frederic. *Nonsequiturs*. MusikTexte, 2007. ISBN 3-9803151-8-5, p. 182.

⁴ "...the audience was invited to bring sounds or instruments and throw them into the pool, while the group, which of course has its own instrumentation, attempted to organize their unpredictable sounds into..." Taken from: RZEWSKI, Frederic. *Nonsequiturs*. MusikTexte, 2007. ISBN 3-9803151-8-5, p. 182.

Learning to Change

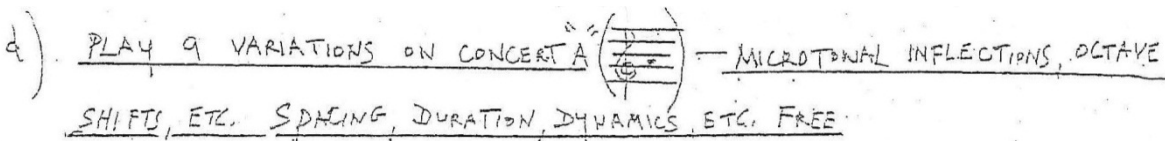
The first three materials are focused on coordinating based on rhythm; pitches and sounds are relative and the resulting harmony is arbitrary. As shown in Example 1, pitch choices are constrained within three relative registers - low is marked below the line, middle is on the line and high is above the line.



Example No. 1: For John/ Material (excerpt)

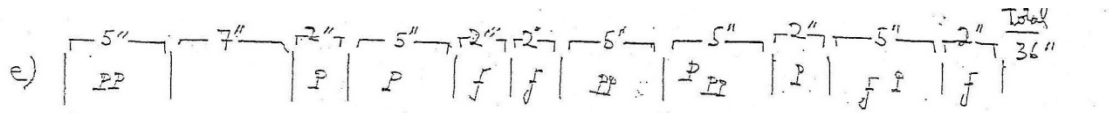
In d), the players focus on playing the tone "A", free to make various microtonal inflections and octave transpositions and to choose spacing, duration and dynamics. The only restrictions here are pitch class and the number of variations (9).

In spite of, or perhaps *because* of, these seemingly simple, open instructions, playing the piece always works very well – even for those musicians who are only classically trained. It is easy enough to grasp the idea, which, when unfolding in time as *music*, leads gently away from the banal and well-known to the realm of the unexpected, so the musicians have an opportunity to experience opening up their minds. From this point of view, it is also an effective pedagogical piece.



Example no. 2: For John/ Material (excerpt)

In material e) Wolff focuses mainly on dynamics. Different dynamic markings are placed within time brackets, and for each dynamic one representative sound (pitch or noise) of any kind and any length is to be played, falling within the respective time frame.

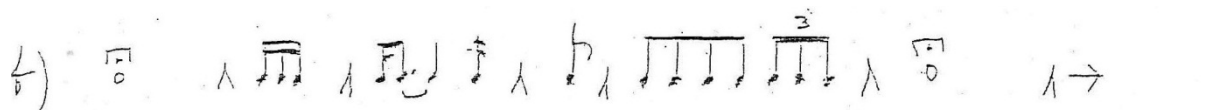
e) 

ONE SOUND FOR EACH DYNAMIC ANYWHERE WITHIN GIVEN TIME SPACE; WHERE NO DYNAMIC SPACE = SILENCE
DURATION OF SOUND FREE


Example no. 3: For John/ Material (excerpt)

Materials f), g) and h) make use of a wedge symbol often occurring in Wolff's music to indicate a pause of free (possibly widely variable) duration. In comparison with pauses written in traditional notation, where the silence is measured in terms of the division of a bar into beats, possibly extended by "fermatas", the use of fundamentally indeterminate pauses affects how one perceives silence and tempo, the flow of time. In a simultaneous performance, this technique produces many unexpected effects.


The wedges of indeterminate duration give the structure specific expression. The material may create heterophonies, but remains distinct from other approaches, for example Frederic Rzewski's *Les moutons de panurge* (1969), in which players follow each other, sharing a common melody in an individualistic way – when a performer gets lost in the structure, then she must stay lost, joining one of the other possible voices that fit into the eight note structure. In Wolff's piece in example g), players have to wait for each other, cueing to play at the same time. This gives a kind of silent conversation in the breaks: performers have to perceive one another and wait for the right time to play another tone.

f) 

λ = PAUSE OF WIDELY VARIABLE DURATION

g) 

λ = PAUSE OF WIDELY VARIABLE DURATION

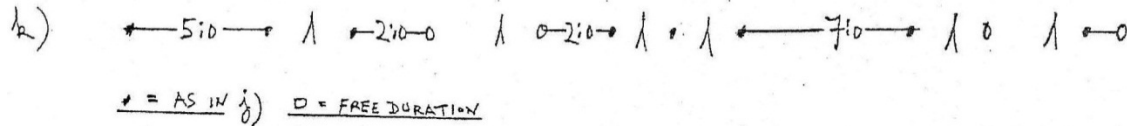
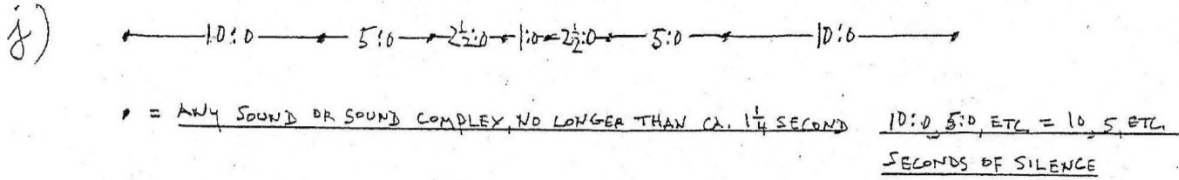
h) 

λ = PAUSE OF WIDELY VARIABLE DURATION

Example no. 4: For John/ Material (excerpt)

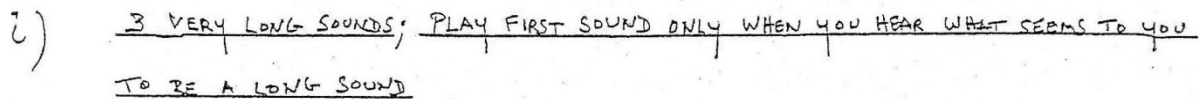
In parts j) and k) Wolff teaches players to realize precisely measured silences framed by sounds of varying but moderate length. Reversing the previous relationship of measured sounds and free silences, Wolff pushes the player to "play" a silence for a certain time. In material k) the exactly determined silences are combined with pauses of indeterminate duration. This exercise can be seen as a next step – experiencing silence measured in a clock-based manner alongside silence determined by real-time responses to the musical situation as it unfolds.

Learning to Change



Example no. 5: For John/ Material (excerpt)

Letter i) is about very long sounds in which Wolff asks each player to listen and to define, by choosing when to play, what seems to be a long sound for that specific context. He teaches players to access the situation from one's own point of view and to enrich it with the choice of something more extreme, something which takes things further.



Example no. 6: For John/ Material (excerpt)

In his pieces Christian Wolff deconstructs music into single parameters, so that when playing one can focus more on the exposed parameter and learn about its function in the musical structure. This kind of thinking has roots in early electronic and serial music. Wolff also encountered it in his musical education.⁵ John Cage described his idea of a *total sound-space* where each sound may be defined in terms of five determinants: "frequency or pitch, amplitude or loudness, overtone structure or timbre, duration and morphology (how the sound begins, goes on and dies away)."⁶

In the first three exercises one is occupied mainly with rhythm, in d) with pitch and its microtonal variations, in e) with dynamics, and in the last ones with silence and lengths of pauses. The rhythmical parts are also important for different kinds of synchronization: parts a), b) and c) are written in a tight rhythm in traditional notation and are expected to be precise in time, though without a specified tempo; while in parts f), g) and h) he leaves it up to the player to place the rhythmical ideas into the space and to choose which pauses to make. All of these fragments embody explorations of skills which are fundamental to a general, basic musical knowledge, the same knowledge we are taught or need to find for ourselves when we learn how to play freely.

⁵ Greta Sultan, the piano teacher of Christian Wolff, introduced the young student to her friend John Cage. Wolff was 16 years old at that time and studied with Cage for six weeks. They worked on contrapuntal exercises and made analyses of the Symphony, op. 21 by Anton Webern. Wolff himself very often mentions this experience and its big impact on his musical thinking. Especially in his early pieces such as *Duo for Violins* (1950) where he works with a limited set of specific sounds (various combinations of three tones) and piece *Nine* (1951) which was composed in the serialist manner, based on the row of nine. From: HICKS, Michael. ASPLUND, Christian. *American Composers: Christian Wolff*. University of Illinois Press. Urbana, Chicago, Springfield, 2012. ISBN 978-0-252-03706-1, pp. 8-10.

⁶ CAGE, John. *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 1973. ISBN-13: 978-0-8195-6028-5, p.9.

ABOUT IMPROVISATION

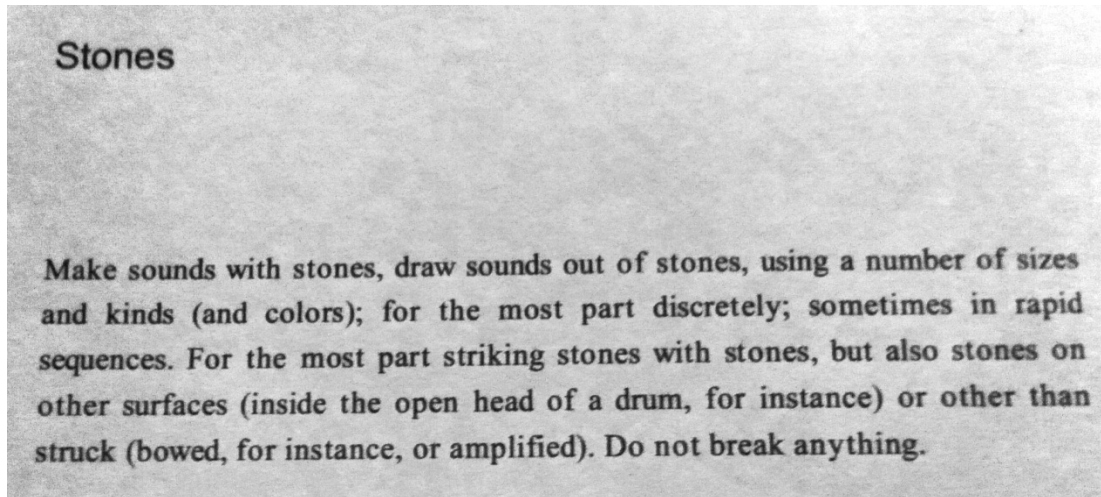
After seven years experience as an active improviser participating in workshops, concerts and seminars, I would like to summarize some approaches and practices which seem to be common in the teaching of free improvisation, sometimes called non-idiomatic improvisation. The teachers/improvisers usually introduce their own method of playing and give the group exercises derived from their music and their ideas about improvisation. It seems to me that there are some common ground-rules already established which help one learn to play in this “free” manner. The most usual consideration is how to give each another enough space to be heard, how to listen to one another. There are various ways in which an improviser can share her knowledge. Mostly these involve talking about playing experiences and trying out various exercises. The practice of improvised music is essentially finding a balance between making decisions about certain parameters in advance (for example, knowing what you will play) and making other decisions in real time (for example, leaving space, listening). In a similar way, the interaction between real-time and fixed decision-making is exactly what Christian Wolff’s notated scores are exploring.

In Wolff’s pieces I have found that a great source of this knowledge may be absorbed efficiently through playing his scores. The information seems to transfer very directly into the performers’ skills and the learning goes rapidly. The information is received in musical language through the notation, so even when expressed in words as a text instruction it keeps its complex nature and gives space for the performer to process it in his or her own way. This approach is more general than normal language and one gets precise information as well as space to add something of one’s own. The notated materials are also helpful when the player doesn’t know what to play. Wolff’s ideas are a starting point to learn how to interact which supports creativity in free playing. By practising the pieces, one acquires certain knowledge which clarifies musical expression and communication. The improvisation can become more mature, enabling deeper connections among performers.

Wolff’s music shows concrete ideas about what and how to play. The way these ideas are written teaches performers to make compositional choices, to deal with time in music more consciously. At the same time, a very precise formal world is articulated. The players learn by being given specific choices. With this information as a starting point, common improvisation clichés, for example everyone getting louder together, having solos and making a slow decay, may be avoided. The performers seem to be more responsible for what they play and bring into the common musical structure.

PLAYING “STONES”

In this instance, the group consisted mainly of classically trained players. We began with part d) from the piece *For John/Material*, in order to start to communicate from a simple starting point. The main goal of the project was to interpret the piece *Stones* from the cycle *Prose Collection* (1968-1971).



Example no. 6: Stones (score)

Sound is described in a certain way in this verbal score which involves quite a bit of invention from the players. In the first play-through, I was surprised: the group started to play an uncontrolled mass of aggressively loud sounds, knocking everything about. This was especially unexpected to me because I had exaggerated the instruction "Do not break anything", which is written in the score and is Wolff's very gentle suggestion of the spirit of his music. This piece was, after all, conceived while wandering along a beach of pebbles, picking up stones, and rubbing and striking them together to find out about their sounds. It was written in a time when political action would often turn to violent struggle, and in some way *Stones* might be seen as a social commentary. If we think of a social parallel of this particular situation at the workshop, we might envision a crowd of shouting people, where nobody listens to or understands one another, where there is no possibility of sharing information at all.

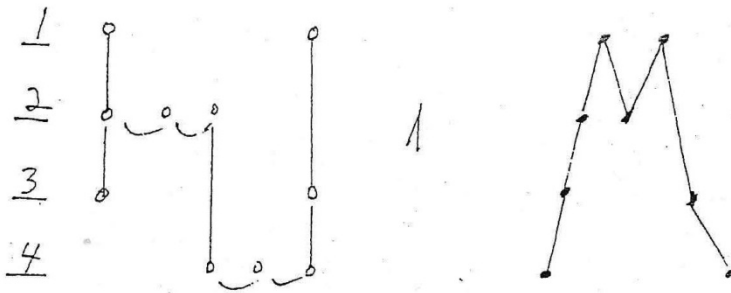
From what I have learned about free improvisation and its aesthetics, I see similarities to Wolff's music in terms of ethics – as in the situation when one meets a new person and tries to open up communication with good will. I would say that there is a certain kind of politeness, mutual tolerance and respect necessary to achieve communication in a truly pluralistic, democratic system, where everybody has a space to express their opinion. The overall expression I got from the students' interpretation was more individualistic, egoistic/anarchistic.

After this experience, I began thinking about how to make players aware of each other and how to clarify the musical conversation. I had them interpret adapted materials from the piece *For John/Material* by using stones instead of instruments, also by using voice with some of the parts. After the performance we could all see that there were more silences, it was more dynamically distinguished, rhythmically clear, more focused and the structure included more space for each and all of the participants. The players could immediately perceive the sound actions of the others. At the end, we repeated *For John/Material* with instruments so that the group could hear the difference between the noise and the pitched sources playing the same structure. The last piece we played was a new version of part d) on the tone "A". From the improvisation point of view, I could clearly see that the musical situation had become much more advanced.

"...miniature models of collaborative activity", where for instance simple musical gesture like a melody is made through the cooperation of four people."⁷

⁷ CHASE, Stephan. THOMAS, Philip. edited. *Changing the System: The Music of Christian Wolff*. Ashgate Publishing Limited. Farnham, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-7546-6680-6, p. 40.

Another technique I often use with a workshop group is Wolff's practice of hocketing. *Microexercise no. 28* helps the performers listen to each other and be very attentive to the moment of continuation and musical flow. The principle is that one player plays a sound and the other has to listen to it and begin his or her own sound at the point when the previous player has stopped. Besides listening, the players also have to play together in some moments. In Example no. 7, there is a chord played simultaneously by the first, second and third players. They have to discuss who will cue the start of the simultaneous chord or whether to listen to each other to start and stop it at the same time. The empty circles mark long tones and the filled circles are short tones. I used this piece as an exercise with a group in Brno. After learning how to structure our sounds this way, the communication in improvisation became clearer and more connected.



Example no. 7: *Microexercise no. 28* (excerpt)

My first experience playing a piece by Wolff in a formal concert was in March 2014, in a performance of the *Nocturnes 1-6* (2008). The piece was originally written for piano, but it can be played by any instrument as well, in this instance for violin and accordion arranged as a dialog. The musical phrases were divided with pauses of indeterminate duration, thus the tempo of every performance was different depending on the context in which we played it.

Wolff's aesthetics parallel social situations we encounter in everyday life, based on communication. Even the most sophisticated language and social skills don't work in every situation and people have to find other ways to interact. The professional player can find this situation especially difficult perhaps due to having practiced a certain musical language for years. Through academic education, players often learn certain attitudes about what music is and how to play it. I often see performers move in certain ways with their instruments as a part of the interpretation. Wolff's music brings about uncommon esthetics, such that the established movements and other academic interpretative habits don't suffice. He pushes the performer to approach the situation as something completely new.

*"Not simply exposing the means of production (through realist transparency) but intervening within them and hence artistically transforming them to create a truly political work rather than an illustration of one. This has remained one of the most powerful concerns of the politicized avant-garde (and here we could include Wolff himself)."*⁸

One of the first pieces incorporating some of the techniques described above in *For John/ Material was Changing the System* (1973–74). Wolff separates melody, harmony, rhythm and spoken word and exposes their function in the work; evident again is the division of individual

8 CHASE, Stephan. *ibid.*, p. 156. Taken from essay by Walter Benjamin: *Author as Producer*.

parameters. Melody and spoken word are composed with the listening/following technique found in *Microexercise no. 28*. The harmony resembles a choral technique – large chords progressing one after another, with undetermined pauses in between. The rhythm is represented by a structure of percussive sounds with different amounts of resonance which each player brings into the piece. The change in the system could be also represented by a complex organization of cues. In the melodic, harmonic and spoken part, the cues are based on listening to each other, and in the rhythmic part the four players switch the cueing around according to written marks.

Wolff perceives the ensemble more as a community, as individuals partly dependent on each other, participating in the realization of a common goal instead of as a crowd he would like to manipulate. He disturbs the established directive approach and hierarchy inside a musical ensemble and makes its organization more democratic and free. Wolff's pieces are usually played without a conductor and all players have to participate in the decision-making, the choices which determine a "composition".

With the combination of fixed and free elements in Wolff's music, we encounter a world similar to the one in which free improvisation has been practiced and taught. Wolff's music predates and parallels the whole era of this musical style which has roots in 1960s "Free Jazz" and similar European developments from the late 1960s. Another important and very different model of "improvised music" is practiced by the European "free" improvisers, such as contrabassist Joëlle Léandre; guitarist and theorist Derek Bailey, bassist Barry Guy; pianists Misha Mengelberg, Alexander von Schlippenbach, and Irène Schweizer; percussionist Paul Lytton; vocalists Maggie Nicols and Phil Minton; multi-instrumentalist and composer Lindsay Cooper, and saxophonists Peter Brötzman and Evan Parker."⁹ Through the coexistence of fixed and free elements people learn to communicate in music instead of just interpreting it. With its versatility, the music reaches a broader mass of people and offers a more democratic kind of social-political system as an alternative to established academic and hierarchical music-making. With Wolff's music as well as with free improvisation we are exposed to a new kind of social behavior and relationships which can be observed in musical practice on stage and spread out into everyday life.

9 LEWIS, George; FISHLIN, Daniel (edit.); HEBLE, Ajay (edit.). *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation and Communities in Dialogue*. Wesleyan University Press, 2004. ISBN 0-8195-6681-0, p. 151.

Berlin Postcards

Fred Maus

In July 2012, we left hot, moist Charlottesville, Virginia for a few days. I went to Berlin to participate in an academic conference where music scholars, mostly from Germany or the United States, would share ideas about "The Art of Listening." My boyfriend Teco came with me, though he was not professionally involved with the conference, nor with musicology. Some of our time in Berlin would be work-time for me, at the conference, while Teco enjoyed the city; the rest of the time, we would explore Berlin together.

Neither of us had been there before. It is possible to be a well-informed, even erudite visitor to Berlin; there is plenty to read about this city and its history. But I was busy that summer, and I barely found time, a few days before departure, to grab a compact guidebook at Barnes & Noble. Teco read in the guidebook a little before we left. I did not; I was finishing my presentation for the conference. With our lack of preparation, we would learn about Berlin mostly by direct experience, feeling our way. In the previous months, Teco and I had been getting to know each other, in Mexico and the United States, feeling our way into an unexpected, complicated, but exhilarating love for each other. On this trip, for a few days, we would work as a team, testing and savoring a new, third object. We had done this before - at Miami Beach, which gave Teco, the previous winter, his first taste of the United States; in New York City, based in a high-rise Greenwich Village apartment building with iconic views of the midtown skyline; in Oaxaca at Monte Albán and San Jose del Pacifico and Mazunte ...

Teco and I first met in the Viveros, a large botanical garden in southern Mexico City, a beautiful and unusual park with broad, shady gravel paths, in long straight lines, and labeled specimens of many different trees. I was walking across the Viveros, from my Metro stop to the center of Coyoacan, on my way to teach a class as a visitor to the Escuela Nacional de Música. Teco was exercising, running on the paths of the Viveros, as he did most days, and he stopped to say hello to me. Immediate attraction. We talked a bit; Teco offered to drive me to ENM, though the distance was short; to my surprise, he requested a kiss as I was leaving his car; we met for dinner the next night, and danced at the wonderful disco "Patrick Miller" ... Now we've been together more than two years.

I'm a middle-aged music teacher and writer about music. Teco is much younger, a computer scientist at the beginning of a good career. He is handsome; to me, he is incredibly beautiful. He has large, dark eyes and thick black hair, and his skin is the smooth medium brown of a mostly-indigenous Mexican. We are tall, and exactly the same height: we can stand, face to face, and look directly into each other's eyes. After meeting me, Teco's sister asked him if our matched height is helpful for making love; Teco replied, "Yes," without giving details. To my delight, Teco likes to wear some of the clothes that I have kept from twenty years earlier, when I was very thin.

Our relationship is a huge part of my world. It's hard for me to know how to evoke it for others, except by giving fragmentary anecdotes. Early on, we heard a concert in the Palacio de Bellas Artes with the glorious Piano Concerto of Carlos Chavez. At the end of the piece I was in tears, partly from the beauty of the rarely performed piece, partly because I had shared the joyful experience with Teco. It was Teco who found information about this concert and bought tickets; I still don't understand how he knew that I would love it so much. Exploring something new, and finding beauty, is important in our way of being together. On our good days, in familiar or unfamiliar settings, we pass the time together in continuous elation. We talk and talk – for the first months it was in French, the language we come closest to sharing, lately, it has been in English as Teco has become more fluent. (So far, my beginner's Spanish has stagnated.)

When we arrive in Berlin, we discover that the conference where I will spend much of the next three days will take place in a newly-renovated industrial building, right next to the river, the old brick walls filled in with spare modernist spaces intended for various kinds of innovative performances, the shapes and colors of the rooms simple and neutral to allow for the widest variety of contents. It's an active arts building, funded by private philanthropy - not an academic building, nor a big hotel with "meeting spaces," the more usual choices for scholarly meetings. I'm pleased. Whatever happens at the conference, the setting will not be stuffy.

A spacious ground-floor terrace offers a perfect view of the river, as do balconies and large windows at other levels of the six-storey building. Commercial tourist boats float by, neither slow nor fast, their decks filled with rows of seats as though for a performance - a performance by Berlin itself. Across the river, there are old industrial buildings, much like the one we are in, box-like red brick structures. But their windows are all broken; huge, bright-colored graffiti cover the walls, and tall weeds surround the buildings. The sky above all this is enormous, and it changes constantly, a new cloudscape every time you look.

This conference about listening includes many hours of academic lectures, as one expects at an academic meeting; at night, there are also loosely coordinated performances and other special events, reflecting the characteristic sensibility of the venue, called Radialsystem V. Teco attends these evening events with me. He also attends a few of the daytime paper presentations, and tells me afterward that musicology puzzles him.

One night, the black-box theater holds a performance of a scene for soprano and orchestra, written by Samuel Beckett and Morton Feldman. For this performance, the soprano is live, and the orchestra is pre-recorded. Neither of us has heard the composition before. The theater is completely full. The soprano sits and stands on a large square platform in the center of the room, with the audience all around her. The only light is on the stage, bright and white, shining down from directly above. People sit very close to the platform in rows of moveable chairs; behind them, a few more people use odd black stools. Earlier that day, the charming young box office employee who gave me tickets said that the performance had sold out, but that we could still attend. Puzzled, I asked how we could join if there were no more seats. "Magic!" she replied, smiling sweetly; "I have magic." Now, when Teco and I enter the room for the perfor-

mance, we notice the black plastic stools; they look like upside-down trash containers. Teco grins, points at them, and says, "Magic!"

To me, on first hearing, the music seems grating and relentless – very different from the meditative, fragile sounds I associate with Feldman. Beckett's verbal text, printed in the program, is desolate, of course, but Feldman has set it in such a high vocal register that not one word is intelligible. With the glaring light, fierce music, and extreme vocal performance, it's as though something white-hot has been dropped into the center of the room. The audience is young and beautiful, casually dressed but elegant. After fifty minutes, these lovely people applaud warmly, showing their gratitude for the soprano's shrill presentation of harsh music and depressive words. I applaud too; it's an excellent, and rare, performance of a unique piece of modern music, and one doesn't expect it to be pleasant. It is strong, committed art, hard as stone, and apparently knows nothing about the pleasant night out that its audience is enjoying. With its uncompromising bleakness, it comes, engrossingly, and then it goes, evanescent like all performance. Teco responds strongly to its intensity, finding it very beautiful.

(A couple of months later, we will listen together to a recording of the music, hearing it for the first time since the Berlin performance. Teco is surprised. He says that the music now sounds depressed to him, that it communicates sadness, whereas the effect of the live performance was exhilarating. I agree, though I've been noticing other things. Hearing it a second time, I find more continuity with Feldman's other music, more beauty and delicacy, now that I am less shocked by the unfamiliarity of its difference.)

The next evening, at the end of the conference, we attend a HathaYoga class in a big room on the top floor of the building. The teacher – a young woman, tall, beautiful, blond, a little stern – spots us as foreigners and warns us, in good English, that the class instructions will be in German. Though she doesn't seem to welcome our presence, we want to join. Because of tight scheduling, we are finishing a hasty dinner. Pointing at my sandwich, the instructor tells me firmly: "Finish that before you come in the room!" The class is about to begin, and I enter with my mouth stuffed full, still chewing.

The yoga is not demanding, and with the small vocabulary of the instructions and the physical examples of the teacher and other students, we participate easily. There are about forty people in the room, on mats that radiate out in a half-circle around the teacher. Again, the participants are mostly young and elegant, and fluent in the yoga moves that the teacher requests. Entering after the other participants, Teco and I take the places we can find. We are a few yards apart from each other. During the class I watch him, enjoying his smooth, confident, accurate movements. At one point, everyone balances on one foot. I am wobbly; Teco is calm and immobile.

But this is no ordinary yoga class; it's part of an evening festival to explore different kinds of listening. Tonight, every room in the building is busy with some kind of offbeat project related to sound. After twenty minutes of yoga poses and stretches, we lie on our backs, eyes closed, to meditate. At that moment, a guitar player silently enters the room and plays a series of isolated notes, with long pauses between. In our state of relaxation and meditative openness, the mental and bodily resonance of each note somehow sustains, long after the physical sound

dies away. It's a lovely opportunity to contemplate the relation between ephemeral sound and the gentle, prolonging clasp of memory.

Well, perhaps I shouldn't be describing the effect of the guitar notes. To be honest, at the end of a three-day conference, I fall asleep as I lie on my back, and afterward Teco tells me that I snored. "It was horrible!" he adds emphatically. He is amused as he says this, but I see that he was embarrassed. Still, I seem to remember experiencing all the guitar notes; and at the teacher's subsequent command, I promptly arise from my mat, with everyone else, to end the meditation. "Namaste," says the teacher. "Namaste," we all reply.

Soon after the yoga class, about thirty participants gather, at the other end of the same large room, for an encounter with "Music and Wine." As the yoga class leaves and the wine tasters gather, the average age in the room seems to soar, perhaps twenty years upward; the clothes are suddenly rather formal. There are long tables, with white tablecloths and with water and bread to share. In front of each seat are four glasses of wine, two red, two white. Each place also has a small pad of paper and a pen, no doubt so that we can hang on to any valuable thoughts that may flit across our minds. Teco and I sit across a table from each other; as a result, we are able to follow each other's reactions throughout the experience.

What will we all do? Two young men, almost the only young people left in the room, will lead us. There's a long prologue, in rapid German that I can't understand. Then, carefully following the behavior of the native speakers, Teco and I taste each wine, in tiny sips. It's pleasant to go so slowly. I remember, in a meditation course at Charlottesville's Mindfulness Center a few months earlier, an exercise in which the instructor guided the class, for about eight minutes, as each of us ate just one raisin. This wine tasting is also an exercise in mindful oral attention, though less extreme. People sip, ponder, and write on their pads.

Then, the leaders of this event turn to a laptop computer and quietly discuss some mp3 files together, making choices on the spot, and first of all, selecting some Renaissance choral music for us to hear. There is music and everyone sips the wines again, slowly, one wine and then another. I am not sure what we are doing. Are we thinking about how the combination of flavor and sound affect each other? Might the right music bring out some previously unnoticed quality of a wine? Or vice versa? Teco is writing. I admire his spirit of participation; I'm not trying to write anything. Afterward, Teco shows me his pad: "Thank you for the delicious wine. Unfortunately, I cannot understand any of your instructions in German. I am drinking wine and listening to music with my partner, very nice. We do this at home, too."

The wines are pleasant. Their differences are not elusive. One white is delicate, fruity, floral, a little sweet; the other is softly austere, not harsh, odorless. One of the reds is gently sweet and tastes of raspberry. The other red is rather ferocious: a very dark color, opaque, acidic, tannic, no trace of sugar.

We continue listening through various musical styles, with pauses between examples. Bhangra, jazz, hip hop – listening and sipping. The audience is almost all white; the music is not. Twice, the leaders summon our attention and ask us to determine which wine goes best with the mu-

sic they are playing. Is that supposed to be the point, to find the best match? It would be a little like matching wines and foods. In our first vote, the result is charmingly disorganized – every wine has some partisans. But later, when the leaders ask us about the proper wine for the hip hop track, I wince inwardly, foreseeing the result: the heavy, dark red is the unanimous choice. Am I right that this is an awkward race-tinged moment – the “blackest” music, the “blackest” wine? It passes. We sip a little more. We negotiate with those around us for the bottled water – there is not quite enough. The event flickers and fades; people rise and meander out of the room. Very nice.

Apart from the conference, Teco and I find time to roam in the city. We both love long walks. The streets and sidewalks are in excellent condition, and clean. It’s relaxing to walk without watching for cracks or holes. Delicate aromas of food, tinged with the ubiquitous scent of beer, drift over from outdoor restaurant tables. The food here surprises me with its subtlety; every cheap plate of potato salad and sausage is beautifully understated, to my U.S.-formed palate. We’re in northern Europe in mid-summer; the sun shines from 5 AM to 10 PM, always gently. Storms pass through, with mild or fierce rain for a few minutes, followed by more sunshine. The places we walk are never crowded, and never empty. It’s easy to relax, easy to feel that all is well with the world. Everyone seems to be relaxing here. We walk where Jews were forcibly removed from their homes, where buildings were bombed to rubble. Without thinking, we cross the street, strolling idly across the obsolete boundary between East and West; some of these well-paved streets have taken the place of two walls, between which people were shot dead trying to cross from one side to the other. I hold Teco’s hand, and we wander where homosexual men were arrested and sent to concentration camps.

On the day of our arrival, we have an afternoon and evening to explore Berlin before the conference begins. During the afternoon, we see the very grand Brandenburg Gate, an emblem of the city, and then we wander to the nearby Museuminsel; as the name indicates, it’s an island with several fine museums. We arrive too late in the day to visit a museum; instead, we rest on the island in the inviting grassy space in front of the Berlinerdom, a cathedral from the time of the German Empire. The building and its park seem beautiful to both of us. Curious about the cathedral, I lie on the grass and check the description in my guidebook. The book doesn’t give me much historical information about the building, but does tell me that it is not a very good building; I’m informed that it is a feeble copy of St. Peter’s in Rome. This is a letdown. I was enjoying lying in the sun in front of this grandiose building. I decide grumpily that the building is beautiful and that I am not getting along well with my guidebook, and I lie flat on my back on the neatly clipped grass, a few feet away from Teco, closing my eyes and enjoying the delicate warmth of the afternoon sunlight. I stretch out my arms and then fold them inward, resting my hands just below my armpits. I feel tranquil and contented; I doze. Teco takes a picture. In the photo, the position of my arms, tucked up high on my sides, looks much sillier than it felt; eyes closed, face slack, I seem to impersonate a deeply peaceful hen.

Later, our first night in Berlin, Teco and I walk for hours in the Tiergarten, a huge park in the center of the city. The soft yellow sunlight lasts late into the evening. The park is mostly woods, with wide, winding gravel paths. The tall, round deciduous trees offer sweet shelter; the park is completely different from the dense, rangy forests, closely packed with competing pine and cedar trees, back home in Virginia. It’s quiet – we hear only the rustle of leaves, an occasional

voice speaking or laughing, traffic sounds when we approach a road. As we walk, I slip into the warm embrace of a cliché: I imagine that we are somewhere very old, the curves of the trees offering to share a rich wisdom, ripened over many years. Later, I learn that the area was severely damaged by World War II bombing. The serene park, like so much in Berlin, is a post-war reconstruction.

There are surprises in the woods. Emerging from a shady path, we find ourselves in a big, bright meadow, with a few scattered boulders. The meadow and stones are a work of art: someone placed the stones in the open space, and they are partly carved and polished. We learn from a sign that the stones come from all over the world and, by some process I do not understand, every year on June 21 the carefully arranged rocks draw together many points around the globe through the action of reflected sunlight. Teco and I play, like children, lying on our backs on medium-sized bench-like stones to look at the sky, then leaning back against polished surfaces twice our height, clowning a little, using the camera's shutter timer to preserve our idleness in a few funny pictures. The stones and space make up a monument that has nothing to do with the German Empire, the Third Reich, or the Cold War. This benevolent monument says: "You are here, at this particular place, related to various other places on the Earth." It is as though the stones smile at us with a goofy New Age tranquility.

The next day, at the conference, I am chatting with a professional colleague. I mention that it is my first visit to Berlin. She tells me that she maintains a home in Berlin, as well as one in New York City where she teaches. I'm impressed, of course. Thinking of the Museuminsel, the cathedral, and the Tiergarten, I tell her that Berlin is a beautiful city. "No," she tells me firmly. "Berlin is not beautiful. A city like Paris or Rome is beautiful. But Berlin is interesting." (During the conference, the same woman will give a paper about a contemporary artist whose work she finds conceptually very interesting, but not artistically beautiful. It seems to be an emotional configuration that suits her.) As with the guidebook, I've been corrected by my colleague; my experts do not support the pleasure I take in Berlin. Still, I want Teco and me to continue discovering more for ourselves, without relying on other peoples' assessments, and I trust our sense of beauty.

Sometimes, when I am attending lectures at my musicology conference, Teco wanders Berlin by himself. One day, he is running in the Tiergarten when a thick, heavy rain begins. Teco takes refuge in a men's restroom in the park. As his eyes adjust to the darkness, he realizes that several other men are standing around in the room. No one is excreting, as the nature of the building seems to propose. Teco is, he realizes, in the company of several middle-aged men looking for sex with other men. One of them asks Teco, in English, how he is. Teco is fine. The man asks him if he is gay. Teco says yes, he is. Next, the other man suggests that they could do something together. No, Teco replies; he has a boyfriend whom he respects, and he does not want to have sex with someone else. "Oh," says the other man; "I didn't know gay men in the United States are so respectful of their boyfriends." Teco reaffirms, to the other man, that he will wait in the restroom until the rain stops, and that he does not want to have sex. They wait silently; the rain weakens, and Teco can leave. Later in the day, Teco tells me about the incident. It doesn't surprise either of us; casual homosexual propositions are common, and Teco, young and attractive, gets them frequently. Often, the assumption seems to be that, since he

is gay, he will accept any sexual offer he receives. For now, Teco and I have each other, and such interactions seem foreign.

Across the street from the Tiergarten, outside the park, a vast, mysterious array of coffin-like stone rectangles, silent except for sounds from the adjacent street, commemorates the deaths of Jews in the Holocaust. We don't notice the Holocaust monument on our first visit to the Tiergarten, but a few days later, we watch some visitors wandering among the cold blocks. Then we enter the monument ourselves, and walk toward the center; as we continue, the stones around us are higher and higher. It's a little like passing along the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, as we did a few weeks before. When you move into these monuments, they dwarf you, more and more, but as you continue walking, you gradually escape from the overbearing high stones; the monument releases its grip, and you are aware that the people whom these monuments commemorate did not escape. We see a few children trying to play in the narrow paths, a half-hearted hide and seek, but the gray stones are cheerless.

Across the street from the Holocaust Memorial – back in the Tiergarten, nestled in its own small clearing – is a Memorial to Homosexuals Persecuted Under Nazism. It looks like a big gray concrete box, or a small gray building, an ambiguous mismatched continuation of the other memorial. You can look inside the box, through one small window, to see a short black and white film of same-sex couples, kissing. Like a closet, the monument shelters these kisses and imprisons them.

As we take turns peering in the window, a young heterosexual German couple walks by, not visiting the monument but just passing through the clearing. We ask them to take a picture of us, standing in front of the monument, holding hands; they agree, without enthusiasm, and they depart promptly after taking three quick shots. Teco checks the pictures. "You look so serious!" he exclaims. "Well," I tell him, "it's a Holocaust memorial." Sure enough, in these photos I have the solemn, mournful expression that I evidently considered appropriate for the location. My face says, "Isn't homophobia awful! Terrible things have happened." But in the same snapshots Teco, gazing warmly at the camera, has a relaxed smile, calm and charming. They are odd pictures.

At the time of our visit to Berlin, Teco has been living with me in Charlottesville for seven months, but it's not clear how long that will last. There are various reasons for our uncertainty but, for one thing, the laws are not on our side. In Mexico City, Teco had a good job; in Virginia, he is on a tourist visa and cannot work. Every time he leaves the United States and wants to come back, he might be turned away. (We don't know, for example, what will happen when Teco tries to re-enter the United States after being in Germany.) But in Berlin, as he stands in the sun, next to a grim, gray memorial, his face says: "We don't know what will happen next, but today is a beautiful day."

Composition in the 21st Century: The Need for Critical Insertion

Joan Arnau Pàmies

I.

Attempting to prescribe what the role of the Western composer in the early 21st Century may be may be perceived as a lost cause. Some may even say that doing so would be an act of totalitarianism; that I would be interfering with individual, artistic liberty—that there is no single role, but many potential roles. Ideally, composers and artists should always have the absolute of freedoms to make any work they want without anyone or anything coercing them into oppressive aesthetic, political, or socioeconomic structures. One should start this critique from here. I am not trying to oblige anyone to make and organize sounds according to certain traditions. I am not declaring that some aesthetic approaches inherently have greater legitimacy than others. If we all were making music in a vacuum, where nothing besides that music could influence the works we created, any music could exist notwithstanding outer prominent forces. However, we composers do not live in a vacuum. Instead, we are part of a brutal economic system of production and distribution whose impact can be recognized beyond the realm of economics. As Karl Marx wrote in 1859, “[i]n the social production of their existence, men [and women] inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. *The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men [and women] that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.*”¹ This paragraph is central to Marx’s historical materialism. In fact, historical materialism has permeated the left’s intellectual ecosystem, and its implications have been studied by a number of thinkers for a long time: Trotsky, Lenin, Pankhurst, Adorno, Luxemburg, Benjamin, Althusser, Horkheimer, Arendt, Jameson, Marcuse, Harvey, Negri, Foster, Žižek... these are just a few names; many more could be added to this list.

This essay makes a simple, straightforward argument based on Marx’s analysis of historical materialism: composers do not live in the aforementioned vacuum where anything could potentially happen without further consequences beyond the domain of music; instead, it must be our responsibility to make music that challenges the capitalist status quo. Before I delve into what this “new music” may be, it is imperative to dismantle certain assumptions that have been made about modernism. Often, these are made through the lens of postmodernity: Lyotardian micronarratives² are seemingly more efficient at giving a voice to those who had never had access to independent discourse. Postmodernism aligns itself with the liberation of so-called minorities; it primarily touches upon feminism, gender and LGBT rights,

1 “Karl Marx: A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” accessed April 26, 2015, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/>. Emphasis added.

2 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Originally published in 1979.

and race. It goes without saying that these are indeed exceedingly critical issues that need to be examined and rectified. However, it seems to me that among a number of so-called liberal thinkers who adopt the discourse of identity politics, there tends to be a common disregard for an equally important expression that should be part of the overall equation as well; that is, class struggle. Adorno and Horkheimer never sacrificed their greater critique of the underpinnings of capitalism in order to defend the rights of so-called minorities, yet they still pointed to aspects that are commonly associated with identity politics. A passage of their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is revelatory with regard to sexual oppression against women: "Man as ruler refuses to do woman the honor of individualizing her. Socially, the individual woman is an example of the species, a representative of her sex, and thus, wholly encompassed by male logic, she stands for nature, the substrate of never-ending subsumption on the plane of ideas and of never-ending subjection on that of reality. Woman as an allegedly natural being is a product of history, which denatures her. But the desperate, destructive urge directed against everything which embodies the lure of nature, everything which is physiologically, biologically, nationally, or socially inferior, indicates that Christianity's attempt has failed."³ One must have both: identity and class. In relation to pseudo-progressive identity politics, Sharon Smith argues that "it is not necessary to personally experience a form of oppression to become committed to opposing it. Yet the central premise of the theory of identity politics is based on precisely the opposite conclusion: Only those who actually experience a particular form of oppression are capable of fighting against it. Everyone else is considered to be part of the problem and cannot become part of the solution by joining the fight against oppression. The underlying assumption is that all men benefit from women's oppression, all straight people benefit from the oppression of the LGBT community, and all whites benefit from racism."⁴ Smith further adds: "The theory of identity politics locates the root of oppression not with a capitalist power structure but with a 'white male power structure.' The existence of a white male power structure seems like basic common sense since, with rare exceptions, white men hold the reigns of the biggest corporations and the highest government posts."⁵ While it is unquestionably true that generally white men have been running the world up to this day, one should not make the assumption that the enemy is white maleness. One needs to remember Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, Hillary Clinton, Herman Cain, Tim Scott, Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann, Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, Margaret Thatcher, Phyllis Schlafly, and what could be a longer list of members of so-called minorities that have, at some point or another, enforced (or clearly tried to) repressive policies equivocally associated with white maleness only. To conclude that having someone who is not a white man in a position of power is intrinsically a *good* thing is misleading. It surely demonstrates that white maleness is losing hegemony in the higher socioeconomic strata of society (and this is a reason to be satisfied), but it is not a strong enough motive to suppress the necessary, larger critique of capitalism. The core of the problem is the higher socioeconomic strata.

This is the main issue I see in Georgina Born's *Rationalizing Culture*.⁶ While her ethnographic study of IRCAM does provide good insight into the lack of women and non-white people within the Parisian institution in 1984, it completely neglects to ask whether this unfortunate situation might have been related to the greater logic of contemporary society. Instead, Born claims that 1984 IRCAM had racial and gender biases due to the predominant modernist ideology that, so she says, was representative of the

3 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 87.

4 "Sharon Smith: The Politics of Identity," International Socialist Review, accessed April 26, 2015, <http://www.isreview.org/issues/57/feat-identity.shtml>.

5 Ibid.

6 Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

institution. In another article written by Born called "On Musical Mediation,"⁷ the author also glorifies jazz and popular music, for, according to her, jazz is inherently "lateral and processual,"⁸ as opposed to being "hierarchical" and object-centered; qualities that Born associates with modern music.⁹ By looking into both texts, I will attempt to question her reductionistic arguments against modernism as a means to put an end to the assumption that modern and avant-garde music is intrinsically despotic.

On the other hand, another text I will look into is Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories*.¹⁰ Ngai develops an aesthetic theory that makes an effort to explain how the hypercommodification of contemporary capitalism has influenced art and mass culture. Her assertion is that one can pinpoint three main aesthetic categories—the zany, the cute, and the interesting—that have emerged as byproducts of capitalism in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries. I will argue that Ngai's categories may certainly provide a more appropriate theoretical framework for aesthetics than earlier paradigms, but that such a framework cannot be taken, at least a priori, from a prescriptive perspective (i.e., what artists should do), for that would lead to the reiteration of the same models that need to be questioned.

Finally, my conclusion will provide the prelude to an argument—which will require collective magnification to fully blossom—in order to develop a common artistic ground among those of us who believe in the power of music to filter into society's greater psyche and (hopefully) contribute to the much needed change of those socioeconomic and cultural structures that oppress us.

II.

Georgina Born's *Rationalizing Culture* is a polemical text. Beyond the primary purpose of the book,¹¹ Born develops a discourse on what seems to be her severe antipathy for the avant-garde phenomenon. It is quite fascinating to read how the author conceals her agenda by ideologically aligning herself with the pseudo-progressive discourse of superficial readings of identity politics, thus neglecting to engage with the greater, threatening logic of contemporary capitalism. Among the authors Born likes to cite, one can find Pierre Bourdieu and Raymond Williams. She expresses that "[b]oth writers begin by acknowledging the sociological specificity of art and culture. Unlike the majority of scholars working in cultural studies over the past two decades, both are committed to analyzing the cultural field as a totality, to tracking the way that any cultural form must be grasped through its implicit differentiation from coexistent forms."¹² One should remember that Born approaches her research from the perspective of social anthropology, not musicology—this will lead her to fabricate grave assumptions in terms of her research and conclusions, as I will point out later. Born often goes back to the Bourdieuan distinction between cultural and economic capital as a means to question the *raison d'être* of the avant-garde. For her, avant-garde artists "saw themselves as a vanguard charged with pursuing uncompromising progress, by definition ahead of current tastes, and so with a pedagogic mission to educate and convert the unenlightened audience."¹³ This is a crucial (and problematic) aspect in Born's critique of the avant-garde: the alleged disconnect between the artistic artifact and contemporary audiences due to the unintelligibility of the work. By

7 Georgina Born, "On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology, and Creativity," *twentieth-century music* 2,1 (2005), 7-36.

8 Ibid., 27.

9 Ibid., 27.

10 Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

11 The opening line of Born's research document states the following: "This book centers on an ethnographic study of IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique)." (Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, 1.).

12 Ibid., 25.

13 Ibid., 43.

borrowing Francis Haskell and Renato Poggioli's discourse, Born claims that avant-garde artists went through a "gradual internalization of an ideology which proposed that art must attempt to subvert the (aesthetic) status quo, since artistic value depends on being 'ahead' of current tastes, which implies that it must *necessarily* be incomprehensible to the present audience."¹⁴ Furthermore, she even writes that "the majority of modernist movements centered on formal experiments designed to subvert and shock the avant-garde's dual enemies: the academic and official art establishment and the bourgeois audience. They sought no broader social engagement or political effect."¹⁵

Born's reading of the avant-garde is tendentious and unfair. I would like to stress that the avant-garde—or, for that matter, any aesthetic project—cannot be categorized in such a simplistic manner. Perhaps it is true that Duchamp's *Fountain* is an instance of art as subversion, but claiming that "the majority of modernist movements" had similar intentions is an overgeneralization. On the contrary, the avant-garde is a highly complex phenomenon that encompasses a wide variety of artists with differing goals. To claim that avant-garde artists "sought no broader social engagement" demonstrates that Born is unaware of the true nature of certain crucial aesthetic-political approaches, particularly in the domain of music. Frederic Rzewski, an American composer and member of Musica Elettronica Viva,¹⁶ was undeniably interested in the political in his practice, as one can easily perceive from several of his pieces such as *Les Moutons de Panurge* (1974) or *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* (1975). Although Cornelius Cardew rejected his own experimental music at a later stage of his life, he cofounded the Scratch Orchestra, an experimental ensemble where anyone—no matter what gender or race they associated with or what level of musical skills they had—was invited to join and perform. As Cardew writes, "[p]eople in the Scratch Orchestra also took the line of integrating with the workers and fighting alongside them, as opposed to standing on the sidelines and cheering them on, or taking a stand above them and lecturing them on what they should be doing."¹⁷ Paul Griffiths ratifies Cardew's views of the orchestra by pointing to the fact that "[l]ike a revolutionary cadre, the Scratch Orchestra was from the first to be alert to its own evolution, and almost inevitably that evolution led it from the modeling of egalitarian relationships in music to active political engagement."¹⁸ To her credit, Born does mention both Rzewski and Cardew in *Rationalizing Culture* and acknowledges their political interest, but then she makes the bold claim that their practice should be labeled as postmodern¹⁹ *because* their music seemingly fits a number of categories that she takes for granted. Postmodern music, according to Born, has to do with "indeterminism, irrationalism, sociopoliticization" and is "physical, performative" and "simple."²⁰ It is certainly difficult to see how Rzewski and Cardew's respective oeuvres, which for the most part have such clearly defined goals in terms of both the musical and the political, can be called irrational or simple.

Born's understanding of serialism is equally problematic: "The serialist composers of the '50s tried in different ways to generalize serialism in order to produce a new, universal method of composition. Following their reading of Webern's late technique, they extended serialism to the rationalist and determinist control not only of pitch but of all other parameters of composition: rhythm and duration, dynamics, and timbre. This became known as 'total,' 'integrated,' or 'generalized' serialism."²¹ According to the author, a major figure

14 Ibid., 43-44. Emphasis added.

15 Ibid., 42.

16 Musica Elettronica Viva (MEV) is an ensemble of freely improvised music founded in Italy in the mid-1960s that still performs to this day.

17 Cornelius Cardew, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* (London: ubuclassics, 2004), 7.

18 Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 187.

19 Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, 56-61.

20 Ibid., 63.

21 Ibid., 50-51.

of the avant-garde who embraced total serialism was Pierre Boulez. Born points out that “[h]aving purged the technique of Schoenberg’s ‘mistakes,’ Boulez announced that serialism alone was the way forward to music. This laid the groundwork for what became the dominant ‘50s avant-garde development, total serialism, in which (...) the structuralist principles of serialism were extended to dimensions of music other than pitch.”²² This latter claim is false. As Richard Hermann writes, “the vast majority of modernist composers never embraced ‘total serialism’—the closest attempt in music to determinism—and even the few who briefly did try it (such as Boulez) rejected it immediately.”²³ Only very few pieces written at that time employed a “totally” serialist method. In the specific case of Boulez, the early *Structures I*, written in 1952, represents his last attempt at composing music in which all parameters are serialized²⁴ (other major pieces by the composer, such as *Le marteau sans maître* (1955) and *Répons* (1984), do not follow the aesthetic prescriptions of total serialism that Born discusses). Furthermore, Born’s inaccurate belief that total serialism dominated the compositional landscape during that time was refuted by Joseph N. Straus in his famous article “The Myth of Serial ‘Tyranny’ in the 1950s and 1960s,”²⁵ a statistical study about the influence of serialism on several domains of production and distribution in the new music apparatus. Straus stresses that “whether one is inquiring about academic positions, performances, publications, recordings, prizes and awards, or attention in the press, serial composers were represented roughly 15 percent of the time, hardly a position of dominance. Between half and two-thirds of composers, throughout the period and in all corners of the musical marketplace, wrote in a relatively conservative idiom, with a style that maintained strong ties to traditional tonality. The other significant groups of composers worked either in a free atonal style or in a more experimental idiom.”²⁶

The relationship that Born describes between modernism and mass or popular culture also hides factual information. Born discusses Adorno and declares that his dialectical process results in “an active antagonism toward and repudiation of mass culture.”²⁷ What Born fails to look after is that Adorno’s critique of mass culture is unequivocally connected to the underpinnings of the capitalist apparatus. Adorno does not hate mass culture per se; he does have problems with the appropriation and industrial reproduction of popular artifacts due to the necessities of consumerism. As he stresses in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “[t]he culture industry has developed in conjunction with the predominance of the effect, the tangible performance, the technical detail, over the work, which once carried the idea and was liquidated with it. By emancipating itself, the detail had become refractory; from Romanticism to Expressionism it had rebelled as unbridled expression, as the agent of opposition, against organization. In music, the individual harmonic effect had obliterated awareness of the form as a whole; in painting the particular detail had obscured the overall composition; in the novel psychological penetration had blurred the architecture. Through totality, the culture industry is putting an end to all of that.”²⁸ The term “culture industry” is what Born fails to fully grasp. Adorno speaks of culture industry, while Born disregards the word “industry” and decides to only focus on the word “culture”. It seems that Born cannot (or does not want

22 Ibid., 81.

23 Richard Hermann, “Reflexive Postmodern Anthropology Meets Musical ‘Modernism’: Georgina Born’s *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995, 390 pp.” *The Online Journal of the Society for Music Theory* 3, 5 (1997), accessed April 24, 2015, <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.97.3.5/mto.97.3.5.hermann.html>.

24 G.W. Hopkins and Paul Griffiths, “Boulez, Pierre.” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed April 24, 2015, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.turing.library.northwestern.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/03708>.

25 Joseph N. Straus, “The Myth of Serial ‘Tyranny’ in the 1950s and 1960s.” *The Musical Quarterly* 83, 3 (1999), 301-343.

26 Ibid., 302.

27 Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, 45.

28 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 99.

to) acknowledge that what she calls mass culture is a product of capitalism and the needs of the market. Unless this relationship is problematized, speaking of popular culture as if it were representative of “the people” is a fabrication that conceals the actual truth: capitalism is not concerned with the liberation of minorities and the tolerance of alternative discourses; capitalism has a fetish for the accumulation of capital and will systematically keep destroying anything that interferes with its agenda.²⁹ Born writes that “[m]odernist assertions of difference from mass culture are expressed (...) as simple ‘uninterest’ in that culture.”³⁰ But, again, this is incorrect, even in the domain of music. As Hermann remarks, “[t]he sole opposition contained ‘Within a unity of difference to popular music,’ ‘nonreference, absolute difference, nonacknowledgment’ versus ‘reference, transformation’ [all terms employed by Born] is also fraught with problems. Mahler’s Symphonies and Debussy’s piano music employed quotations and parodies of folk and popular musics; Schoenberg and his students made arrangements of works by Johann Strauss, the ‘Waltz-King’; with his *Ebony Concerto*, Stravinsky fills a commission from swing/jazz band-leader Woody Herman; Schoenberg and Stravinsky were both involved with film music (unsatisfactorily to them as it turns out); and Schoenberg had wonderful things to say about the music of George Gershwin.”³¹ I would also add to this list Bartók’s use of Hungarian folk music in his compositions, Shostakovich’s film scores, and Charles Ives’s *Holiday Symphony* as well as his 114 songs.

This is perhaps the biggest issue with Born’s critique of the avant-garde: she assumes a previously acquired,³² simplistic, binary logic of opposition between modernism and postmodernism—two terms that cannot easily be compartmentalized—as a means to defend her bias against anything that vaguely resembles high art, serialism, or any other type of artistic product that is, according to the author, deterministic, rationalistic, universalist, cerebral, complex, or linear and teleological.³³ In his fierce review of *Rationalizing Culture* (cleverly entitled *Born to Die*), Ben Watson, a Marxist music writer, points to a tendency that successively appears throughout the book: “*Rationalizing Culture* retails the familiar postmodern narrative: the bad European father underestimated the Yankee son, and modernist centralization (aka the ‘Communist Party’/the welfare state) lost out to low-tech, the Apple Mac and the Internet (aka market liberalism).”³⁴ He further adds: “[Born] accuses avant-garde artists of refusing the general audience ‘gratification’, as if audiences are a ready-made constituency, and not created by specific economico-artistic vectors.”³⁵ Indeed, Born’s arguments throughout the book make the false assumption that postmodernism represents a definitive step towards individual liberation, when in fact most postmodern thinkers either avoid or neglect the critique of the greater socioeconomic logic.³⁶

29 For more information about this phenomenon, I recommend reading Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2008).

30 Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, 45.

31 Hermann, “Reflexive Postmodern Anthropology.”

32 These are some of the sources Born uses in order to differentiate modernism from postmodernism: Diana Crane, *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism.” *New Left Review* 146 (1984), 53-92; and, Simon Frith and Howard Horne, *Art into Pop* (London: Methuen, 1987).

33 Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, 63. As for the author’s claim that modern music is “teleological,” one should simply remember Boulez’s Third Piano Sonata (1955-57) or Karlheinz Stockhausen’s *Klavierstück XI* (1957)—among other aleatoric pieces of that decade—in order to realize that this is another one of Born’s misconceptions.

34 Ben Watson, *Adorno for Revolutionaries* (London: Unkant Publishers, 2011), 119.

35 Ibid., 122.

36 Several philosophers have questioned the false progressiveness of postmodernism. Here is a number of relevant sources: Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (New York: Wiley, 1991); Alain Finkielkraut, *The Defeat of the Mind* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); and, David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990).

Similar issues also arise from Born's "On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity."³⁷ As she describes, "[music] favors associations or assemblages between musicians and instruments, composers and scores, listeners and sound systems—that is, between subjects and objects."³⁸ It is certainly relevant to discuss what the relationship is between these entities, but one cannot address the topic by vilifying modernism and the avant-garde. Moreover, it is infantile to make the assumption that popular music (and jazz, in the case of this particular article) inherently questions aspects of musical production such as ownership, agency, and hierarchy. Popular music and avant-garde music are not packages that have been already determined by some sort of demiurge; these are approaches to music that are in constant processes of self-definition and cannot be separated from their socioeconomic context—cultures do not live within a vacuum. As Watson suggests in relation to *Rationalizing Music* (the same claim can be made about her article), "commitment to anthropological 'science' means Born's book is devoid of any aesthetic judgements, apart from between-the-lines hints that everything at IRCAM is mandarin bullshit, and that her own involvement with pop is infinitely worthier; but this is moralistic pomp-populist point-scoring, not critique. (...) The treatment of Frank Zappa exemplifies anthropology's squeamishness about facing the musical object. Born says that Pierre Boulez conducting Zappa was 'a moderation of Boulez's rejection of popular music.' This remark could only be made by someone who has not seen or heard Dupree's *Paradise*. If this is pop, then *Tempo* is *Smash Hits*."³⁹ He further adds that "[a]nyone who had actually listened to a modicum of Zappa's music, though, would have found the linkage [between Boulez and Zappa] unexceptional: like Boulez, Zappa extends the tradition of Debussy, Stravinsky, and Varèse, stringing together sonic events achieved by innovative instrumentation in order to reward the attentive ear."⁴⁰ Born's severe categorization of musical aesthetics leads to this type of problems: Zappa was certainly influenced by many of the works by popular artists, but it is equally true that a significant portion of his production gravitates towards music often associated with the avant-garde.

The same issue takes place in the domain of jazz. According to Born, "[t]he ontology of the musical work [i.e., the notated score, the modernist product] envisions a hierarchical assemblage: the composer-hero stands over the interpreter, conductor over instrumentalist, interpreter over listener, just as the work ideal authorizes and supervises the score, which supervises performance, which supervises reception. (...) the work ontology disavows each of the three orders of social mediation set out at the start of this article"⁴¹ through its belief in music's transcendence of the social. The sociality of music-making, the embeddedness of the work in broader social relations of class, gender, race and nation, its dependence on patronage or market exchange; none are understood as immanent in the musical object; all are disavowed and denied."⁴² In contrast, "the jazz assemblage (...) is lateral and processual. Jazz entertains no split between ideal musical object and mere instantiation, no hierarchy between composer as Creator and performer as interpreter of the Word."⁴³ This is another blatant, fallacious generalization that needs to be tackled.

Firstly, it should be noted that there are many examples of composers influenced by modern traditions whose works are explicitly connected to the social. Mathias Spahlinger, a living composer who

37 Georgina Born, "On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology, and Creativity," *twentieth-century music* 2,1 (2005), 7-36.

38 Ibid., 7.

39 Watson, *Adorno for Revolutionaries*, 118.

40 Ibid., 118.

41 "[1] music's social and temporal mediation and its nature as a distributed object (...); [2] music's mediations have taken a number of forms, cohering into what we might term assemblages (...); [3] this approach has value in highlighting shifts in the dominant historical forms of musical assemblage." (Born, "On Musical Mediation," 8).

42 Ibid., 26-27.

43 Ibid., 27.

resides in Berlin, has been focused throughout his long career on questioning the validity and certain totalitarian tendencies related to concert hall culture. As the composer says, "I see the development of new music in a very particular context. I am convinced that the material development of new music is characterized by a higher degree of self-reflection than we find in older works of art."⁴⁴ This level of awareness can be discerned in pieces such as *Extension* (1979-80) for violin and piano, in which the two instrumentalists start performing their parts conventionally (i.e., on stage) while later on are free to leave the stage and do any type of activity that is not commonly associated with a more traditional understanding of music performance; or *Doppelt Bejaht* (2009), "a series of etudes for improvising, spatially distributed orchestra without conductor."⁴⁵ But even if one looks into the music of a composer like Brian Ferneyhough, whose works may superficially appear to be difficult, complex, formalist, inaccessible, and non-questioning of the greater logic, a similar level of social awareness can be perceived. *Time and Motion Study II* (1973-76) introduces a cellist bombarded by a monumental amount of notational information, which requires her to struggle in order to read and interpret the score. On top of that, the cellist is in charge of two pedals. Each of the pedals controls the amplitude of two delay processes that record the sound of the instrument during performance. Both delay processes reproduce the recorded sounds at different times: 9 and 14 seconds respectively after recording. Furthermore, the cellist is also asked to sing, but her voice is processed via ring modulation. This intricate setup, paired with the extreme interpretive difficulty in the score, portrays the instrumentalist as an individual who has been trapped in this tortuously oppressive system; i.e., labor productivity and Taylorism, as the title of the piece evidently suggests. Other pieces by a variety of composers have also focused on the social: Luigi Nono's *Intolleranza 1960*, Stockhausen's *Aus den sieben Tagen* (1968), Christian Wolff's *Burdocks* (1970-71), Johannes Kreidler's *Fremdarbeit* (2009), Richard Barrett's *CONSTRUCTION* (2005-2011), etcetera. Born's belief in the separation between so-called modern music and the real world is thus inconsistent with the facts.

Secondly, it is problematic to take for granted that jazz, as an aesthetic, intrinsically questions certain traditional hierarchies. One can think of Muhal Richard Abrams and the AACM, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, or even John Coltrane. Indeed, these (jazz) musicians did attempt to explore alternative means of music-making. But jazz is also represented by Wynton Marsalis's Lincoln Center series, Kenny G, Diana Krall, Paquito D'Rivera, St Germain, Jamie Cullum, and many other commercial artists who buy into the commodification of music—and neither do they address the present oppression of black Americans who live in poverty nor issues of gender or race.⁴⁶ *Strange fruit has faded into oblivion*. Overall, Georgina Born's discourse easily falls apart after comparing her assumptions to the foundations of modernity.

III.

Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories* is a tour de force in the domain of aesthetic theory. Ngai's purpose in writing the book is crystal clear from its very first paragraph: "This book makes a simple argument about the zany, the interesting, and the cute: that these three aesthetic categories, for all their marginality to aesthetic theory and to genealogies of postmodernism, are the ones in our current repertoire best suited for grasping how aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified,

⁴⁴ Mathias Spahlinger, "how it is," *there is no repetition: mathias spahlinger at 70* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2015).

⁴⁵ "3/12: Concert 3," *there is no repetition: mathias spahlinger at 70*, accessed April 25, 2015, <http://norepetition.tumblr.com/march12>.

⁴⁶ The connection between poverty, race, and gender is crucial. No one in the official socioeconomic structures questions Condoleezza Rice for being a black woman or Ted Cruz for being latino.

information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism."⁴⁷ The book is divided into five chapters: an extensive introduction that touches upon the significance of these three aesthetic categories as a means to address a culture that has been transformed into a product of consumerism, three chapters about each respective aesthetic category, and an afterward. Ngai's allegiance to Marxist methodology can be recognized throughout the book, thus avoiding the traditional rhetoric of postmodernism that scholars such as Georgina Born employ. Ngai argues that "[t]he best explanation for why the zany, the interesting, and the cute are our most pervasive and significant categories is that they are about the increasingly intertwined ways in which late capitalist subjects labor, communicate, and consume. And since production, circulation, and consumption are not just economic processes but also modes of social organization, our experiences of the zany, the interesting, and the cute are always implicit confrontations with the imaginary publics that these ways of working, communicating, and consuming assume or help bring forth."⁴⁸ The author acknowledges that her categories are products of Western capitalism, as she writes that they emerge "in tandem with the development of markets and economic competition, the rise of civil society, and an increasingly specialized division of labor."⁴⁹ Furthermore, she adds that "[t]he rise of the weak or trivial aesthetic categories (...) thus takes place in conjunction with an overarching habitualization of aesthetic novelty, an increasing overlap between the domains of art and theory, and a loss of the longstanding tension between the work of art and the commodity form."⁵⁰ These are qualities often discussed by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Ngai's analysis of the three aesthetic categories at stake is insightful and does provide an alternative way of looking at aesthetics beyond the Kantian understanding of beauty that, according to Ngai, is still of major importance in the works of other philosophers such as Nietzsche, Adorno, Hegel, and Derrida.⁵¹ This is a consequence of Ngai's own take on affect theory⁵²: "Indeed, the zany, the interesting, and the cute seem to offer ways of negotiating these problems affectively, both at the formal, objective level of style (...) and at the discursive, subjective level of judgement."⁵³ She further adds that "[t]he zany, the cute, and the interesting thus help us imagine what the discourse of aesthetics might become when aesthetic experience is no longer automatically equated with awe, or with rare or conceptually unmediated experience."⁵⁴ Ngai thus advocates for a materialistic approach to the assimilation of aesthetic phenomena, which embodies a greater subjectification—through the bodily, the physical, and the psychological—of analytical methodologies. Nonetheless, Ngai attempts to approach the zany, the cute, and the interesting "as objective or formal styles"⁵⁵ as well. Her categories are taken from both perspectives: judgement and style.

According to Ngai, the "cute" aestheticizes powerlessness. Something is cute when it is weak, tiny, diminutive, or unthreatening. However, in certain cases, this only happens on a superficial level. A very insightful example of this is Robert Creeley's poem "The Willys",⁵⁶ which Ngai uses to suggest that the cute

47 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 1.

48 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 238.

49 Ibid., 15.

50 Ibid., 21.

51 Ibid., 2.

52 Affect theory may be defined as a relatively recent approach to analysis via a greater understanding of both bodily and psychological processes. Lauren Berlant, Elspeth Probyn, and Brian Massumi are three of its representative authors. Massumi, in fact, was the translator of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* into English, a text that arguably has influenced the field of affect theory.

53 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 2.

54 Ibid., 24.

55 Ibid., 29.

56 Creeley's poem:

has the ability to dramatize ‘even the money commodity—the most immediate embodiment of exchange value, according to Marx, or the commodity whose use resides precisely in its exchangeability—’⁵⁷ as a fetish. This is particularly interesting because, according to Ngai, cuteness is often embodied into soft, blob-like faces (such as frog-shaped sponges,⁵⁸ the emoji smiley face,⁵⁹ or Murakami’s round-shaped character DOB⁶⁰) that are seemingly guiltless, yet it is “capable of making surprisingly powerful demands.”⁶¹ One could thus argue that behind the surface of cute aesthetic products lies a byproduct of the cultural consequences of capitalist propaganda.

Jennifer Lynde Barker defines Ngai’s “the interesting” “as an aesthetic category typified by the idiosyncratic, discursive, incomplete, and relativistic, as well as the ordinary, inessential, and accidental.”⁶² Ngai uses John Baldessari’s *Choosing* in order to demonstrate some stylistic qualities of the interesting. Baldessari’s example consists of a series of four photos. Each photo contains three green beans, and since the shape of the green beans is quite different from photo to photo, one eventually assumes that, in fact, there may be a total of twelve green beans. However, as Ngai explains, “[e]ach row shows a finger pointing to one green bean out of an array of three, then another as the nonchosen beans are replaced with two others, and so on.”⁶³ The formal subtlety in the sequence of photos is thus evident. The author then claims that “[f]rom this perspective, the seemingly styleless style of Baldessari’s series, with its pun on connoisseurship by featuring acts of discerning fine difference between things of a particularly humble type, reads more like another metastyle: a style precisely about how there is ‘no question of style unless there is the possibility of choosing between alternate forms of expression,’ as Stephen Ullman puts it.”⁶⁴ By stylistically becoming a phenomenon of “yet-to-be”⁶⁵ conceptualization, Ngai relates the interesting’s objective features to its own ability “to highlight and extend the period of an ongoing conversation.”⁶⁶ The interesting’s capacity “to differ (...) from a general expectation or norm whose exact concept may itself be missing at the moment of judgement”⁶⁷ makes this aesthetic category highly unstable, in that it becomes “a placeholder for further judgment.”⁶⁸ Consequentially, the interesting is an aesthetic in a constant process of self-redefining its own, deepest nature.

Ngai’s final category, “the zany”, is perhaps the only category that explicitly relates to matters of cheap labor and poor working conditions—aspects that are very common in neoliberalism.⁶⁹ Ngai explains that “the zany is about performing. Intensely affective and highly physical, it’s an aesthetic of nonstop

Little
dollar
bills.

57 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 63.

58 Ibid., 64.

59 “Sianne Ngai: Visceral Abstractions,” Vimeo, accessed April 25, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/101565050>.

60 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 82.

61 Ibid., 64.

62 Jennifer Lynde Barker, “*Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute Interesting* by Sianne Ngai,” *Film Quarterly* 67,1 (2013), 81.

63 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 33.

64 Ibid., 34.

65 Ibid., 112.

66 Ibid., 234.

67 Ibid., 112.

68 Barker, “*Our Aesthetic Categories*,” 81.

69 For a better understanding of the neoliberal condition as a whole, I recommend David Harvey’s *Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), one of the most astute accounts of neoliberalism that I know of.

action that bridges popular and avant-garde practice across a wide range of media: from the Dada cabaret of Hugo Ball to the sitcom of Lucille Ball.⁷⁰ The zany anthropomorphizes the strain of the working class into comedic characters that are confronted by an array of unfortunate circumstances. Ngai thus expresses that “this playful, hypercharismatic aesthetic is really an aesthetic about work—and about a precariousness created specifically by the capitalist organization of work.”⁷¹ Two of the examples she employs in order to demonstrate the influence of the zany are Ben Stiller’s 1996 film *The Cable Guy* and Richard Donner’s *The Toy*, starring Richard Pryor. In both movies, the main characters struggle at adapting to the system, as they get into different freaky situations. In *The Toy*, “Carl, the male African American protagonist, masquerades as a woman, Lucy, to get hired as a domestic servant for a wealthy white family.”⁷² In *The Cable Guy*, Jim Carrey’s character (i.e., the cable guy), after plugging Steven’s (his client) apartment into the cable network, “voluntarily provides [him] with the bonus service of social networking, devising complex machinations to keep Steven, recently jilted by his fiancée and extremely depressed, linked to his coworkers, friends, and family, and thus from sliding into an alienated and *unproductive* stupor in front of his television.”⁷³ In consequence, the zany supplies a number of fictional characters that are incapable of doing their jobs properly, yet still try to do so in the most ridiculous, foolish ways. The zany, in my view, embodies the current lack of Marx’s concept of class consciousness in the minds of the oppressed workers.

From a purely analytical point of view, Ngai’s categories surely contribute to getting better insight into aesthetic paradigms of contemporary capitalism. Nonetheless, they do not have any sort of prescriptive power if the artist wishes to create cultural artifacts that escape the necessities of the market, unless the artistic treatment of these categories dialectically clashes against ideas outside the immediate influence of the market (e.g., one may want to use the zany; the question is in which way it is used and whether certain recontextualizations of the category can still be considered to be Ngai’s definition of the zany; is the zany still zany when it is aware of its zaniness?). Mass culture and art may be zany, interesting, or cute as a result of the socioeconomic intricacies of Western capitalism and not the other way around. Adorno and Horkheimer present a narrative of the creation and distribution of culture within capitalism that arguably has not been surpassed yet: “the planning is in fact imposed on the industry by the inertia of a society irrational despite all its rationalization, and this calamitous tendency, in passing through the agencies of business, takes on the shrewd intentionality peculiar to them. For the consumer there is nothing left to classify, since the classification has already been preempted by the schematism of production.”⁷⁴ The means of production define the nature of culture, so it is crucial to recognize who owns the means of production in order to find out what the owners’ ultimate reasons are behind the distribution of culture. Georgina Born’s unaddressed assumption that the market signifies freedom—as opposed to state-funded art, which according to Born results in the homogeneity of thought⁷⁵ (i.e., IRCAM is a public institution that constrains composers by forcing them to succumb to modernism and its evil plan)—is misleading and sadly irresponsible, to the extent that it resembles some of the most reactionary and irrational Friedmanesque⁷⁶ beliefs that one can encounter. Fortunately, Ngai, on the other hand, shows greater awareness of the relationship between market and mass culture. I would even say that her three

70 “Our Aesthetic Categories: An Interview with Sianne Ngai,” *Cabinet Magazine*, accessed April 25, 2015, http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/43/jasper_ngai.php.

71 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 188.

72 Ibid., 210.

73 Ibid., 198. Emphasis added.

74 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 98.

75 The whole chapter 4 (“The Institution of IRCAM: Culture and Status,” 102-142) in *Rationalizing Culture* is a rant that links the lack of female presence within the French institution to the ideological stand of modern music.

76 I suggest reading Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

aesthetic categories converge into a fine theoretical basis that may enhance the necessity for an artistic-political attitude of resistance.

IV.

In conclusion, a question I often ask myself is, what is there to do under such hostile circumstances? What power do we have as composers to offer resistance and keep the struggle alive? It is excruciatingly difficult to find practical answers to these questions. Nonetheless, the alternative is the implicit cooperation with the status quo and the progressive loss of both individual and collective liberties. Evidently, this is not a desirable outcome. Answers will not come from individuals alone. As separate individuals, we can contribute with analyses, thoughts, and alternatives, but I highly doubt anyone will arrive at truly meaningful conclusions on their own. For that matter, a process of politicized collectivization of the aesthetic cause needs to take place. This is not to imply that aesthetic homogenization is desirable—not at all. Aesthetic hegemony often leads to dogma and rejection of any approach that strongly differs from such hegemony. Whether a composer writes pitches, timbres; parametric, text-based works; rhythmic, pulse-based music; mash-ups and respectful usage of other musics; tonally-oriented pieces; slow, long, or soft (not that these are qualities that should be placed together) music... None of this matters as much as one would think, since these are decisions based on what needs to be on the surface of a particular discourse. That is the reason Ngai's theory of aesthetics may be extrapolated into the prescriptive domain, for it correlates every work of art with categories within the system—one thus has the opportunity to make music that avoids existent aesthetic categories and searches for new ones, confidently outside of capitalist cultural structures.

A dialectical process within the logic of a particular piece and in relation to its outside world is what seems to me to be required. Among the horrors of certain postmodern trends, there is the belief that any artistic artifact—unless it spreads large amounts of explicit hate (i.e., fascism, homophobia, racism, etc.)—has the right to exist because, by not allowing its own *raison d'être*, one would become disrespectful and totalitarian. This view may be understandable, but nonetheless it conditions a cultural landscape that eventually becomes irresponsible and complacent of the greater state of affairs. By disengaging ourselves from dialectical critique and culturally authorizing *quasi-anything*, we play a part in the predominant free-for-all ideology that, under the disguise of progressiveness, hides its true endeavor; that is, the submission of humanity to pyramidal, cruel structures of power. Making, creating music is a tremendously laborious task, for music is formed by a complex system of signifiers on all of its levels. I firmly believe that it is one of the purposes of the composer to gain as much awareness of all the elements that contribute to a piece of music—this may seem obvious to some, but it certainly does not apply to most music that exists. However, the crucial remark that needs to be done with regard to this awareness involves the necessity for the emergence of an *ultimate purpose* that transcends inner musical boundaries. Awareness on its own is, yet again, the mere result of a culture that seemingly glorifies the heterogeneous to the detriment of class struggle. This is a false truth that embodies the fallacious argument that class struggle is not in vogue anymore; it stands for the often heard assumption that the right and the left are not representative of the aforementioned heterogeneity of contemporary society—which, in turn, has been promoted by capitalism through its mechanisms of mass distribution. This fallacy is embedded in the Deleuzian rhizome,⁷⁷ where anything may be related to everything anytime. Deleuze and Guattari surely presented a reasonable analysis of the propagandistic apparatus of contemporary capitalism, but it is critical that one gains consciousness of the descriptive character of their investigation—otherwise,

77 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Originally published in 1980.

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a prescriptive reading of their work may lead to reactionary results. In reality, socioeconomic classes are strictly compartmentalized and the natural abilities of the subject are not powerful enough to liberate itself from the constraints applied by class structures. The rhizomatic model does not work when one is in search for practical answers. In other words, a member of the working class cannot simply move back and forth between different socioeconomic strata due to her lack of monetary affluence. On the contrary, the capitalist, with her accumulation of capital, is free to roam around the many dimensions of reality. For this reason, the excessive permissibility of the postmodern condition towards aesthetics is unwelcome and needs to be replaced by a critical engagement of the work with regard to its position as a force of rebellion. The underlying connection between these “new musics” is not the superficiality of certain compositional methods, but rather their systematic intent to belong to a world outside capitalism—these musics must become a token of (so far) utopian realities.⁷⁸ When Schoenberg questioned tonality by writing his early free pantonal pieces, he did an act of rebellion. The medium (tonality) that no one in the West ever challenged before—on a deep, conceptual level—was then rejected. For Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms, music could not be conceived without tonality. Music *was* tonality. After Schoenberg’s post-tonal oeuvre, music did not need tonality anymore to justify its own existence. When Lou Reed released *Metal Machine Music* in 1975, he brought Luigi Russolo’s ideas about noise and music back to the cultural forefront. Both Reed and Russolo questioned the traditional notion of music as organized sound. These were also acts of rebellion. The composer must *insert* herself into reality, not as a means to accept it, but to change it for the benefit of the collective. As Hannah Arendt affirms, “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work. (...) its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative.”⁷⁹ Insertion means taking individual action through collective effort, so that serious and critical engagement with the music that we make and surrounds us can be developed. To insert ourselves into the world; that is the role of composers in the 21st Century.

78 About tokens of other realities, see “Richard Barrett: The Possibility of Music,” accessed April 26, 2015, <http://www.rogerreynolds.com/futureofmusic/barrett.html>.

79 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 176-177.

An excerpt of *Dr Sarturnian's Monologue*, Section IV of *Song of Anonymous* (a nomadic novel) a novel in progress by Pedro R. Rivadeneira.

"Fundamentally, everything that is said is a quotation . . ."

Thomas Bernhard, *Walking*

Dr. Alan J. Sarturnian, old, retired, multilingual, multitalented scholar, philosopher, musicologist and composer, now dabbling in magic, alchemy, shiatsu and astrology. He now lives with his twin sister Helena, an artist of international repute, in the Nordeinde quartier of Den Haag, in one of the old, prominent, four story houses typical of that area, not two blocks away from the Queen's working palace. Collapsed into bitterness, his eyes never look at me, they move rapidly from side to side as if frantically searching for something. Rumour has it the Doctor had a nervous breakdown years ago and has attempted suicide several times, events which have forced him into an early retirement.

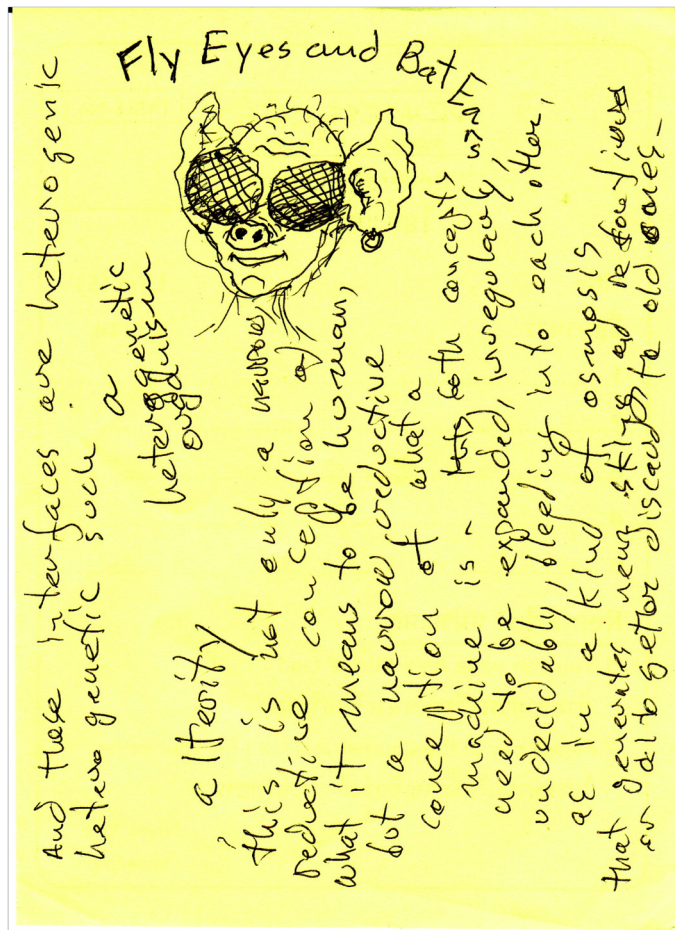
The old man is sitting in his study blankly staring out the window with cigarette in hand. The room is saturated with smoke. He is a short, thin, wiry man of dark complexion. His hair, now mostly dark gray, is longish and scraggly, arrayed in an unruly mass around his prominent forehead and temples. He sits next to an ancient oaken desk on an old, oak office swivel chair that squeaks when he moves. The desk is piled over with books, papers and empty bottles. Several ashtrays lie about brimming with ashes and cigarette butts. He's wearing a worn out terry cloth robe in a faded navy blue color spattered with food stains and cigarette burns. His scrawny legs are bare with the exception of a pair of thin, shin high socks and his feet are encased in a pair of worn out felt slippers, also blue in color. He shuffles his feet restlessly on the littered wooden floor as he sits facing the studio window through which can be seen bare trees in the darkening yard behind the house. I have come to see the old professor, with whom I studied years ago, in the hopes he will help clarify my doubts and dispel the crisis I'm in.

. . . something rules over us which it seems has nothing to do with us - the old man suddenly whispers - we barely have any control any understanding of it of ourselves let alone the rest of the world nature the universe . . . - he continues in a lecturing, somewhat pedantic tone - Proust's notion that after Cézanne our perception of nature changed provides not only the consolation that poets extracted from impressionism it also implies fear fear that the thingification of the relationships between humans will contaminate all experiences and so become quite literally an absolute - he trails off into silence as if suddenly distracted by other thoughts and then begins again - of course this fear has come to pass - he grunts almost chuckling - a girl's beautiful face becomes homely ugly even because of its similarity to that of a movie star's in accordance with which the girl's face is in reality *prefabricated* - he emphasizes grimly - a *prefabricated* face in this age of a totally administrated existence this age of total mediation the beautiful in nature passes into being a caricature of itself these faces these bodies considered to be beautiful *sexy* are no more beautiful no more sexy no more *natural* than those landscape paintings found in the lobby of a cheap motel which in any case are more interesting of more value due to their kitchyness which is their truth content . . . of course . . . of course - he wheezes on - nothing real is worthwhile extracting cleanly from what is ideologically its own lest the critique succumb to an ideology itself that of the *simple natural* life so called - he says with a sarcastic drawl -

wha' happens is . . . I've been trying to write again you see - he is still talking as if to someone else, his back now to the window, directing his gaze to the wall in front of him across the room, next to the studio's entrance - a writing experimental experimental

in syntax and in form perhaps a novel I thought but writing outside the book or in any case on the margins of various books trampolining as it were from one to another at times writing through them borrowing burrowing restructuring and recontextualizing the borrowed material not necessarily pointing to anything outside itself if that is at all possible . . . for language is a system a system of symbols a referential system if not explicitly then it points to it implies other systems . . . if that is at all possible . . . self sufficient and winding in gesture . . . this may be possible if one treats or . . . *re-treats* language as material I thought that is to say taking into account its visual and acoustic properties only stripping it of its semantic surface . . . but isn't that word itself metaphorical? are we really dealing with a *surface* that conceals layers of other . . . stuff? or isn't it rather an artifact of our brain's perceptive mechanism if it can be called that an *artifact* a *mechanism* aren't these figures of speech too? isn't all language figurative in that a word any word is not the thing it points to but stands for that thing represents it and this standing for something else takes place in the mind's eye the mind's ear from whence it derives its hypnotic quality? . . . I mean to say its *cinematic quality* that is to say the *film* we have going on in our minds all the time the brain in a constant move to map reality compares and matches the surrounding *external* reality to its representation projected on its *internal* screen . . . of course all of this is figuratively speaking as well *internal external* what does it all mean? in fact this oscillation is what creates the perception of an *inside* versus an *outside* this oscillation by the brain this comparing and matching with the model the brain constructs electrochemically in the midst of its gelatinous tissues hidden from view I mean from the rest of the world *inside* the protective casings of the meningeal encephalic tissues and fluids and the skull's bone . . . d'you know that the brain and its network of nerves including the spinal chord stripped of the rest of the body greatly resembles a Portuguese Man O' War? oh yes! but of course it is by far deadlier so much so that the Man O' War and a host of other creatures may soon be extinct! - he cackles nervously - what does that tell you about this organ of ours? this organ that we are the brain which has evolved over thousands of years only to find itself at odds with just about everything there is including itself and others like it? - he inquires turning toward me suddenly, fully revealing for the first time the entirety of his face which is smeared with a pale rose shade of blush on his left cheek and a dim shadow of mascara around his right eye together with a hint of rouge in the left corner of his mouth - well? isn't it? I mean language that is to say always already self sufficient and self referential as when we use language to talk about in other words which is to say to describe language itself? and what is an *itself* in this context? I mean is a word any word always in a kind of synecdochic or metonymic relationship to the rest of the system to which it belongs? assuming it *belongs* to anything assuming language is indeed a system - he muses - I am always stunted by these kinds of questions don't really know what to think anymore it all seems so paradoxical - he says screwing up his mouth in a kind of mocking gesture once more turning his face toward me - in any case how are these other *layers* which supposedly "underlie" the so called semantic "surface" of language - he says gesturing quotation marks in the air with his fingers - these other *strata* if we are to call them that if they are indeed strata how are they not meaningful themselves? who's to say that they don't in their own way contribute to the overall meaning of the text? and of speech? these distinctions often seem to me to be just as arbitrary just as phony as the *body mind* dichotomy in fact I would wager that's where they originate in that false dichotomy - he gestures dismissively and spins around on his chair while tapping and shuffling his feet on the floor playfully, like a child - t'would be better me thinks to think of language as a complex in which several elements *intersect* I mean figuratively speaking that is to say the semantic aspect of it together with the visual and acoustic information each of these elements taken separately are already very complex the

pitch and timbral information of speech I mean the spectral information in vowel formants for instance is a lot to deal with and a very rich source of material for musical composition as well what's more considering that language has attributes that are said to be those of music such as rhythm tone timbre phrasing internal relations between its various parts and . . . *silence* as an integral part of its expression and that it is often polyvocal who's to say that it *language* isn't in point of fact *a kind of music*? . . . what meets the eye doesn't make much of an impression I'm afraid if you are looking to jump caught between the Devil and the wild blue sea you had better look it over before you take that leap . . . I don't pretend to be clairvoyant or I should say *that* can't be said by *me* can't say it *is me* who says these things that is to say a lack of a certain important kind of energy coming up from below a guttural understanding of space and mass you see I mean allowing for inconsistencies and incongruencies "erroneous" impulses and "faulty" thinking to have a "voice" as "they" say *linguaging not languishing* - he gestures impatiently making quote signs in the air again - rather than polyvocal the work may very well be heterophonic or perhaps it oscillates at times periodically and at others in a-periodic fashion between monody polyphony and heterophony one's mouth full of rubble rabble rubble one's rebel mouth full of rabble rubble scrambled noisy sound bursts and spittle projecting the sound out through one's bat ears and as microwave emissions through one's multifaceted multi-perspective fly and dragonfly eyes! . . . drip-drop-drooping in the something to say - he chimes excitedly - all of this of course conceals and *congeals* the general state of lovelessness that prevails everywhere the vertex of which is a dry aching scab the blind spot that drives all our actions dry as flaking wax and propolis with the faint hum of a swarm behind the acerbic aching crust - he laughs mechanically showing his tobacco stained teeth, his accent now shifts from high class British, where the sibilant "eses" become the "sh" of English tinged by a Dutch accent -



and how pray tell is language's so called semantic surface *not* a kind of materiality considering that one's thinking one's imagination the various processes of representation that occur in the brain which are instrumental in the construction of meaning are in effect electrochemical processes that is to say material processes in the brain to say nothing of recent discoveries physicists have made about the nature of matter at its most fundamental level . . .

- rain has begun to rap on the window pane with a gentle pitter pattering sound as rivulets of water stream down the glass distorting the darkening shapes in the yard outside. Nervously, I fidget in my coat pockets, unable to respond to anything the old man says. Besieged by a growing feeling of anguish, not knowing what to do next, I decide to leave, but just as I start moving toward the door, the old man begins speaking again, barely audible this time -

whatever the case may be - he whispers gruffly - today it is impossible to write narrative I mean to write a novel in the realist narrative style which is what most do anyway pretending history hasn't transpired I mean . . . this . . . even though by definition the novel as a form requires narration where the narrator is the owner as it were of the experiences related as such the novel is a product of the bourgeois era historically it is an anachronism and therefore to write in this manner is regressive reactionary even utterly conservative the narrator as owner of the experiences related . . . combinatorial processes . . . - he mumbles distractedly - there is a tension a play between the various levels of meaning and the various levels of non-meaning so-called as if this non-meaning were not in itself meaningful assuming there is an *in itself* - he cackles nervously

again – there is a tension as I was saying a play between the narrator as owner of the experiences related and the reader a kind of web or chain is in fact established but chain too is a metaphor and doesn't quite accurately describe what really I mean *physically* takes place in the neuron networks so called given the enormous amount of apparently random activity therein . . . a kind of oneiric forest emerges in which flashes of lightning occur here and there briefly illuminating ravines faces and voices heard scraggy escarpments an entangled morass of branches and twigs intertwined the word *network* too is problematic you see but it is the best one can do for now perhaps web or *scrub* would be a more accurate description assuming accuracy is what matters after all we aren't engineers are we? a kind of action writing akin to Pollock's action painting the text a kind of scrub like that of straggly vegetation a tangle as seen in brain tissue consisting of millions of neurons with their axons and dendrites twisting the texture of the text varies irregularly it is not that of the typical novel you see it contains destabilizing elements errors undermining the impulse to conformity with the ideologies of perfection and completion *mastery* and therefore *supremacy* the text resists being read as the totality of its subject matters and strategies it having lacunae which remain unbridgeable between any actual reading and any explication of it – he scoffs – I mean the reader must use her imagination but he must use it to free herself from any fixed forms of thought which ordinary kinds of language impose on the mind on the brain like a grid a kind of harness that limits and directs perception and thought in particular ways ways which more often than not serve the current order of things

the new writing the new novel must take sides against the lie the falsity which is representation it takes sides against the narrator herself to be precise who as far as a supervising commentator of the events related attempts to correct his inevitable participation . . . wha' happens is the author detaches himself from the idea of creating something *real* . . . *listening to the whirrr where the words once were* . . . gathering up elocution itself by means of an ironic gesture to which no word including her own can escape . . . *listening to the whorls where the words once whirrl* – he cocks his head to and fro listening, now looking askance at the window and then at the door – wha' happens is the author watches himself in the idea of somethink real listlessly worrying scurrying about the world of words where once gathered enunciation means the iconic pestilence where words drool upon words squealing the new novel was a long time ago – he whispers hoarsely – perhaps we now need a *new new novel* or or somethink else what's more to go against the form lies in the very same sense of the form itself the novelistic or musical form itself . . . perhaps a kind of writing without direction that makes use of prose as well as verse and other kinds of writing and different kinds of media beginning in the middle the muddle of which expands aimlessly toward the edges of beginnings and ledges without end writhing riding writing it's trailing within writing as kinesthetic process – he mutters softly with increasing excitement – bodily function an excretion! as is thinking a kind of action! and reading already made to move across the page always coalescing *you* back into thinking because immense becomes tumultuous occurring and off course it shards *me* talking back into flinging writing as volition handles the thinking – he continues in a soft raspy whisper as if still listening for something – not since the rift between the novel and realism has been linked to the rebellion against discursive language as seen in poetry is it any longer possible to write in a narrative voice as I may have said a voice in which there is someone who is in possession of the experiences being related all that's left now is writing itself I mean the physical act that is to say writing as kinesthetic process in other words writing reading and writing as activity *linguaging not languishing* – he whispers vehemently – where language is the *material* say as sound-thought-image complexes to be manipulated and used in the construction of linguistic sound-image structures that convey a variety of complex forms and meanings I mean to

say the reader is the narrator and the narrator is unknown *is the unknown* from moment to moment for each reader is different and even then an individual is never the same from moment to moment for we are each and every one of us *time* a different continuum of time but time nonetheless . . . it is the reader who is the narrator in reading the text the reader writes the story or perhaps rewrites the story and therefore rewrites *me* the writer the reader narrates the story if it can be called such a *story* if there is such a thing yet given that the metaphysical dimension . . . I mean the anti-realist moment of the new novel if I may call it that is itself a product of its realist object that is to say a society in which we are separated from ourselves and each other the more the writer strictly holds on to this realism of the world of the so-called real external world that is to say the more she tries to tell how things are how they were more so do his words turn into an *as if* and thus more grows the contradiction between the writer's pretensions and the fact that the things related were not really that way at all! . . . writing is a long I mean to say a *protracted* process of editing mostly consisting of erasing and substituting it was the writing that made me vulnerable to *their* prying *their* restructuring my body and mind in the first place their electromagnetic thoughts protruding like searching probosci entering penetrating my territory my boundaries with a slithering gesture curlicue maneuver of parasite frequencies honing in on their next victim with glee feeding on the horror of society more so strictly thus things related predatorial contradiction grows for passive aggressive sentimentalization . . . I find myself being engulfed by language you see it a swarm making its home in and all around me disintegrating and reintegrating the *me* in fact *grating me* - he gestures frantically - a process of granulation in which *I* disappears and reappears into myriad *I's* . . . *oh the night has a thousand I's* - he chants giggling facetiously while spinning around on his squeaking chair - nonetheless I feel compelled to write about this I mean to relate to tell you the reader the listener through I mean to say *with* my writing tell you about this situation and the insubstantiality of the writer as subject tell you about my experience of the dissolution of the writer as subject as experienced by *myself* in the act of writing about *my* dissolution and in doing so I am in fact constructing a narrative about the impossibility of writing narrative!- he exclaims agitated - even as I find myself being engulfed by language you know it is a swarm that makes its home in and all around me disintegrating and reintegrating the *me* in fact *grinding me* - he gestures impatiently - a process of granulation in which *I* disappears and reappears into myriad *I's and yous* . . . *oh the night has a million I's* - he chants again melancholically - of course to say there is nothing left to say *is* in fact to say something just as the one who proclaims the death of the subject of the author *is* the subject the author himself herself but no the main problem with all such writing that is to say narrative linear realist narrative is that it is utterly boring! tedious really just as all such writers are themselves bores - he scoffs - what all that kind of writing really does is to reinforce old habits of reading old habits of thinking and feeling old habits of perception such that it would seem to be saying: *that's just the way things are, the way they've always been and so, will always surely remain!* thus confirming the status quo thus justifying those who wield power over us and keep us in our current state of imprisonment chained to our destinies so called as opposed to say a writing a work that might show us a different way of thinking perceiving and feeling a way of writing that might take us into the unknown and so undermine the way things are a writing - he says gasping frantically - that is itself the unknown an example of difference and so becomes an input for unfamiliar information as opposed to being merely an output for old regurgitated information by which the current system keeps itself in power all of this is further complicated by the fact that the truth is known only to the one who experiences it - he grunts - and if one chooses to relay it to others one automatically falls into falsehoods and inaccuracies all this compounded by one's that is to say *my* faulty and inaccurate recollection of events and things more so after my so called

accident as some euphemistically refer to it thus it is distortions inaccuracies and lies that are communicated the notion of communication being perhaps the greatest lie of them all! and the more one tries to untangle this abstruse web as I was saying the more mired one that is to say "I" becomes in falsehoods and falsifications . . . communication is a coverup; aesthetically pleasing this 'n that in the passive aggressive blah dih blah: you know what you like you like what you know – he mutters against the rain – a limit cycle that keeps *us* spinning round and round in the indifference no new different information allowed sameness comfortable in the purdy please of conformity some knowledge garbage for the trash can lonely tuppaware thinking in the Cartesian ego center of reality ideologically proper this 'n that as the hand that feeds bites off more than it gives – he whispers snidely – giving away globalization for free where the strings attached become chains just around the corner out of sight disintegrates *me* . . . – he snickers blowing smoke rings into the air –

I wanted my writing to be like Beckett's mainly his short stories and poetry you know Echo's Bones Texts for Nothing and such I love the dryness of the language the brittleness of it like dessert sand or the dry flakiness of wax and propolis in beehives the sounds tend to be meager dry paltry ugly even generally unsatisfying the raspy sound of dead leaves rustling in autumn that cold dry wryness of his language . . . or perhaps like a Pollock painting words drip drop drooping in the phosphenic light of night . . . but alas! I failed miserably my writing my thinking can't be anything other than humid wet even laden with adipose moisture the body's humors I was terribly disappointed at first because writing in this manner is said to be weak effeminate even but then I rebelled against these these notions such stupidity! as if weakness and femininity necessarily go hand in hand! as if there's anything wrong with either! my writing can't help but be alluvial consisting of flows ebbs and flows formed by sediments deposited by flowing water briny marshy full of the messy gurglings of one's innards! last night in fact – he starts excitedly – struggling with it *myself* struggling with *my head* my body each wanting to go their own separate ways the head is part of the body you see yet thinks itself . . . *different* better than the body . . . it's in denial you see – he says snickering, then grunts through his nose – the mind the brain thinks itself superior to the rest of the body it has split itself off from it in a fit of denial the brain that is to say *the head* in a fit of panic wants to separate itself from the rest of the body . . . hoping to enhance my negative capabilities that is to say questioning my assumptions I devised a system by which various kinds of behaviour could be observed as simultaneities on split screens . . . subjective states can't be reduced down to mechanical explanations you see unlike say all manner of biological phenomena . . . but nothing I say nothing I write or think is closed final rather it is frayed ragged torn and frayed shreds really . . . a novel like a model say a numerical model or a computer model may have a lot in common with nature but it isn't something real as such . . . like such a model a novel may be very persuasive it may seem true if it somehow resonates with our life our experiences our experience of the world so called . . . nonetheless just as we may question the model and the accuracy of its descriptions how much is based on informed judgment? how much is based on observation and measurement? how much is just a comfortable interpretation of data that suits one's preconceived notions? so too it is with the novel where we may wonder how much the characters and events are based on real life so-called or just the product of excessive artifice . . . of course nowadays it is difficult to distinguish between these *real life* and artifice considering how minutely administered everything is . . . indeed as I may have already mentioned – he exclaims excitedly – society as machine a cybernetic system as Norbert Wiener had envisioned in his book *Cybernetics* not long after World War II and whose ideas were later to become popular in Soviet Russia who were more than receptive to the fantasy of such a society a machine which could be fine tuned by following the principles of Wiener's *Cybernetics* all of which by the way

would have been very appealing to the Nazis as well - he trails off - of course all of this has come to pass in contemporary capitalist societies where instead of using military or police force the subject is kept under control through economic means and information overload which in the end are just as violent as any other form of control - he cackles drifting off again - . . . I've often wondered if Hanna Wiener and Norbert were related - he muses - but all of this is beyond the point of comprehension too much work too complicated beyond one's capacity to process imagine . . . the really comical thing about all this - he wheezes on - the comical thing about all those procedures as applied to the arts and by means of which the artist hopes to create unpredictability and so undo habitual forms of perception and behavior all those procedures which artists apply with conscious methodical and systematic deliberation all of that is always already going on in the brain without us having to do anything special to create them I mean the brain is an indeterminate organ a random number generator whose comportment is difficult to predict if you really pay attention close attention to your mind your brain which is the brain paying attention to itself observing itself you will notice that it is very difficult to know what it's going to do from one moment to the next in fact while paying close attention to one's perceptions it is difficult to know what one is going to see hear feel from one microsecond to the next . . . stupid! naïve! stupid! simplistic! stupid! naïve! - he suddenly shouts while shuffling his feet - to think that by simply manipulating language one could effect a change of consciousness a profound radical change in the brain the mind . . . one problem with this manipulative approach is that manipulateness itself is one aspect of our behavior that needs changing! - he laughs derisively - another is that the language centers in the brain which are in close proximity with that center that small group of cells in the brain that are thought to be the self the ego self awareness . . . - he says gesticulating impatiently losing his train of thought - wha' happens is though they may rewire the neural networks of those centers themselves it doesn't necessarily follow that the more primitive the older parts of the brain are going to follow suit the language and the self awareness centers if they can be called that *centers* . . . are only a small part of the brain the mind's complex web of interactive feedback loops many of which are stuck in a limit cycle aren't necessarily going to change at the flick of the language switch . . . I mean there's much more to the brain the mind to consciousness than the language centers and the ego why it's not entirely clear that mind that consciousness is located only in the brain as many think mind consciousness may be a complex web of relationships between the brain and the body interacting with the rest of the world a kind of ecosystem of the mind if you will - panting he wipes drool and phlegm away from the side of his mouth with the cuff of his sleeve - some scientists have claimed to have identified a small structure in the brain which they think is the locus of the self if this is true then one's sense of interiority is in effect a material a physical place within the skull this locus in the brain excuse me - he wheezes frenetically - I repeat myself when in distress when in distress I repeat myself I repeat . . . not without a modicum of combinatorial variation of course I couldn't bear it otherwise it reminds me of the human condition so-called

but I've been writing - he says again in a hoarse whisper - trying to write again you see. . . trying to regain a foothold in myself . . . but the pen . . . the ink ran out . . . changed to pencil but the lead kept breaking then changed to my type writer and as I wrote I felt I was plagiarizing . . . no . . . I felt the *need* to plagiarize it seemed like the only sensible thing to do the only so called *original* so called *authentic* thing to do the only *honest* thing to do - he pauses briefly and a loud guttural burp erupts from him - in as systematic a manner as possible! - he continues becoming somewhat excited - write a series of plagiarized statements from various sources not necessarily word for word you understand - as he gestures loosely with his cigarette hand a sizeable piece of ash drops off toward the floor - but mostly paraphrasing trying different permutations and orderings changing the

context of the various phrases and so their meanings an ongoing never ending stream of them loosely strung together forming overtime as I write my reading because as you know *all writing is a kind of reading* and therefore a kind of plagiarism - he gesticulates, annoyed, as if batting at loose cobwebs - a loose web of associations and connections . . . leading me to believe that perhaps I should construct a machine! - he exclaims, suddenly livening up, shuffling around in his worn out slippers - a writing machine to do the job for me with only my having to feed it bits and pieces of language phrases words syllables sounds scraps of found language scraps and shreds of found language! - he repeats obsessively grinding his scant and yellowing teeth into the words - scraps found in the ongoing process that is one's own internal monologue internal dialogues energy flows electrochemical currents and flows that is to say a veritable contrapuntal structure consisting of several voices a polyphonic structure consisting of several strands of sounds images thoughts dreams impulses and desires each having its own tempo and direction perhaps akin to those contrapuntal compositions one finds in a certain period of the Renaissance and finding as I've already mentioned these pieces of scrap these shreds of language in the environment as well that is to say the ongoing monologues of others in the various media through which they are disseminated and heard without my having to distress myself with all the thoughts and feelings the unpleasant ones one often finds while writing hurting myself further tearing at the memories the scabs over countless unhealed wounds my own and that of others the one's we never find the time to properly mend entangled as we are in the frey of things

last night at dinner - he says wheezing through the cloud of smoke surround him - I said to my sister: "the idea of meaning is suspect to me because in the world it arouses the impression that meaning is meaningful, and vice versa, what is meaningful has meaning, but the only meaning in meaningfulness," I said to her, "is its *meaninglessness*, I mean to say, meaninglessness is itself *meaningful*" I said this to my sister while she nodded patiently as usual eating her peas, "just as the utter emptiness, the nothingness surrounding us, within us, is somehow full, filled with all the things we like to call existence, *being*" I said again, "while at the same time, there is an *unsatisfactoriness* in being, in fact, it is unbearable, full of meaninglessness, pervaded by emptiness, because it is impermanent, it is time itself in fact that's what being *means, signifies*, if it must mean anything at all" I said, and she said while carefully chewing a mouthful of beef - he says smiling gleefully - "I know what you mean, your insights have always been a source of inspiration to me, they have always inspired my work" - he says she said while still chewing, her left cheek bulging, fork and knife in either hand - imagine that! *myyyy words* my so called insights an inspiration! my empty lost words an inspiration for *her* work! the poor thing! - he exclaims again getting agitated - those incomprehensible paintings of hers I love so much with their bits and pieces of materials of scraps of different kinds of materials constructed in piece meal fashion why art collectors and critics from all over the world come to see them! she turns them away! they offer her thousands of Euros thousands of dollars and she won't sell them any! she exhibits them herself in her gallery shows them to some of her friends and to me - he says approvingly - I have some in my bedroom they are magical windows doorways into other worlds windows into the implicate order depictions of turbulence disorders of various kinds one needs to be careful - he stammers cautiously, eyes wide open - they can take over the entire space suck you in you'll never be found! - he seems to drift off and then suddenly exclaims - and then she said this to me: "there is the unending irritating tendency to think of all discourse as taking the form of a story, most people have the unbearable habit of negotiating their way through life by telling stories that explain who they are and what they are doing and they graft their stories onto the stories of others, onto ours" she said getting visibly despondent - he said - "upon hearing a word, as if a switch had been turned on, people are ready to tell you their life's stories, their sad meaningless stories" -

his sister is supposed to have said – “as if some kind of mechanism had been turned on . . . upon hearing a word, a name, a place, the name of a place for example, they are more than willing to *make a connection*,” – he says she said emphatically with derision – “they want to *communicate* their experiences, *express*, show you the commonality of the experiences which supposedly we all share . . . they are more than willing, they are in fact alert, waiting for the opportunity when they can *share* their experiences and thus show you the connection,” – he says she said with increasing irritation – “but it is in solitude that I no longer feel lonely, it is in utter solitude and emptiness that one, that I, no longer feel the pangs of meaninglessness and emptiness,” she said seeming to me with increasing puzzlement – he says – “meaninglessness is produced by their idiotic, empty chatter about the meaninglessness of life, a concatenation of catastrophes, a self fulfilling prophecy, like machines, at the flick of a switch, they go on and on, most people have this one, unmistakable, annoying characteristic” – he says she spat out with disdain while still assiduously chewing her food, and then he claimed she said – “*the spider resembles the fly, its mate, a trick with which the spider lures its prey in . . .*” she sat there impassibly staring at her food as if defeated – the professor says – but then she said with eyes lighting up, “we are, each one of us, made up of wildernesses, wildernesses interacting in a symbiotic, semiotic relationship, all one needs to do to understand this is to look at electron microscope photographs of various kinds of human tissue: skin, epithelial, lymphatic, I mean, the adenoids and their fluids; our blood, liver, lungs, bone and brain: the dura mater, the arachnoid mater, and the pia mater of the meninges; the adrenal, the thyroid, the pineal and various other kinds of glands; to be sure you will see different and varied kinds of landscapes, each with its own kind of texture and colors . . . not unlike geological formations, or the textures found in different types of plant life both terrestrial and aquatic . . . I fancy them to be like the surfaces, valleys, canyons and caves of unknown planets and asteroids in distant star systems, distant galaxies perhaps, I see them in my dreams . . . these are the sources of my paintings” she said looking at me suddenly happy – he claims – “I pore over countless books on anatomy, internal medicine, pathology and geology, avidly studying their illustrations, I like the photos of endoscopies and different types of surgeries too, *but it is the pathologies that interest me most*” – he claims she said emphatically – “the so-called anomalies, the various kinds of ulcers, tumors and cysts, the warts and birth marks, the different kinds of skin diseases such as psoriasis, rosacea and eczema and my favorites: ulcerated cavernous haemangioma and elephantiasis” she said while ravenously chewing on another piece of roast beef – the old man smirks with amusement – and then she said “it is these so-called *internal* landscapes that inform my work, I compare them to the illustrations in my geology books, look for correspondences, relationships between these inner and outer landscapes, the similarities are often uncanny between the textures, the colors, thus implying a deep connection between the outer and the inner so-called, I go on like this for hours, I can’t help it, clearly a kind of language emerges from these images, from their relationships” she said visibly agitated with excitement – he claims – “a language emerges from these shapes and colors, these textures . . . or rather a number of languages communicating with each other, criss-crossing each other through me, through my consciousness, my awareness of them, my seeing them acts, as a conduit through which they, these languages, made up of various kinds of textures and colors, both organic and geological, belonging to different and distant contexts, the so-called inner and the so-called outer, communicate with each other through me, through my eyes, through my mind, and so too, communicate *with me*, instruct me, show me how a painting, a collage or sculpture is to be,” all this she said to me last night until the day began to emerge from the east and night began to dissolve and the machinery of rodents both areal and earth bound retired for the day – the old man hesitates, mouth agape and drooling, now staring with puzzlement at the floor, but suddenly inhaling, he continues in a distracted tone of voice – of course nothing could be easier than to go totally insane from one moment to the next the problem is not

so much that she has something in her head everybody has the most monstrous things in their heads and these go on without end until our deaths anybody else would become unhinged but not her it is still possible to be outside time and find that all moments co-exist simultaneously! – he exclaims raising his head – play in the gap between them but these are all ruins I mean most of humanity has its head filled with ruins most human beings have their heads full of ruins ruins and detritus like myself she loves the debris the fog the impending grayness she gathers the fragments the fragmented and rather than trying to make them whole again allows for the absences to make themselves felt why the cognitively fragmented world in which we live brings about the desire in many for over arching narratives – the old man says with growing glee – but these turn out to give only illusions of mending the prevalent fragmentation anticipating a totalizing vision that obscures the importance of local events examples and samples of course the description of the fragmentation itself becomes a kind of meta-narrative theorists today while subverting overarching theories one moment create new ones the next thus exposing their hypocrisy! – he exclaims cackling meanly – thus situating themselves as authorities engaged in a power play whose objective is conquest the claiming of a territory domination as it's always been! – he snickers mischievously – to be right always right but no! none of this matters! no matter no being no nothingness no right no wrong no description no overarching narrative no local narrative puaaaagggghhh! these are the strategies of academics jockeying for position trying desperately childishly to establish a secure a stable position for themselves *ourselves* a position of *authority* – he emphasizes derisively – even while preaching instability even while preaching the need for a critique of authoritarianism! these are the biggest hypocrites of all! academics! – he shouts – we are the biggest most notorious shits there are! with our idiotic self importance and cleverness! they are the most prolific producers of turds and consumers of blood who sodomize their students with their alleged truths! *the truth it comes and goes and leaves us in the lurch* – he suddenly intones – *and now we think we can see it from our lofty perch* – he chants playfully – of course of course but no! no! their cleverness comes after their idiocy which has always butt fucked it closely! all the various critiques of power of authoritarianism are privileged forms of discourse by virtue of the fact that they occur *in* and are the product of the academic environment to begin with! – he says pointedly – the ability to criticize is what puts us in a position of privilege to begin with! I mean to say – he stabs desperately at the air in front of him – it is because we are privileged to begin with that we have the time and ability to produce criticism of course with *the best of intentions* to *enlighten* on behalf of *the truth* the various truths we think in our arrogance others are unawares of as soon as we open our mouths as soon as we think we destroy someone's life someone's reputation is destroyed by our thinking our speaking our so-called criticisms we cannot help it it's as natural as farting and as such we enjoy it it gives us immense pleasure in fact we revel in it! – the old man exclaims with joy scratching his ass and burping – why as I've told you already each critical endeavor involves a kind of mapping each description of reality a sort of emplotment by means of some kind of metaphorical language whether that of the so-called ordinary language we use on a daily basis or the more specialized languages like those of science and mathematical notation . . . but perhaps recent developments in poetic language or musical notation would be better suited for this purpose – he remarks snidely – considering how their overarching narratives render stable the destabilizing methods of writers and poets . . . while rattling on and on with their various critiques of systematicism and closure literary theorists philosophers and scientists alike systematically overlook music and in particular the variety of musical notations we've seen throughout the centuries from that of the Gregorian neum to classical traditional notation with its whole and half notes its quarter notes its eighth and sixteenth notes and so on all of which indicate pitch duration harmony and texture

when grouped vertically or into two or more simultaneous melodic lines as we see in counterpoint and more recently – he pontificates wheezing with agitation – in the twentieth century we find all kinds of developments in notation from so-called graphic notations which not only indicate duration and pitch but also density dynamics and a kind of gestural language up to and including of course a variety of programming languages or code as they say used in today's computer music! – he gestures wildly with his hand while catching his breath – these are all kinds of notation many of which if not all lend themselves to a variety of interpretations thus involving an element of indeterminacy and so in varying degrees resisting closure and the absolutism of the systematic but of course – he says still in a pedantic tone of voice – this requires a shift from notions insisting on the deterministic character of nature to one that emphasizes stochastic statistic descriptions why at the risk of sounding like one of those new age idiots the entire universe is capable of development and innovation! random fluctuations at the local level have the potential of propelling the writing the artistic work toward a point of bifurcation at which the direction of change becomes unpredictable! the work no longer emerges from the idea *the story as idea* where language is the mere vehicle for the story the mere instrument for the story's expression rather whatever story there is it emerges from language itself from the structures formed from this material I mean to say it emerges from the different possibilities for construction *already present in the linguistic material itself* the language and its ever changing constructs are what make and unmake me in it / appears and disappears free of all intentionality . . . I will never say / because of everyone I won't speak again no I won't speak to anyone no one will speak to me I will listen to no one just as no one listens to me I won't speak to myself there is nothing left to say nothing but dust will spew from my mouth dust blown by the cold wind the freezing cold wind that incessantly blows through everything throughout millennia from a beginningless past

but I mean I'm interested in this kind of thinking if it can be called that that is to say this kind of *residual weed-like* thinking if it can be called such a scaling down a solution or dissolution desolation dissolved in desolation I I forget – he stammers on – an energy more like impulses electrochemical impulses a kind of stuttering without rhyme or reason which is rarely steady and often exhibits considerable variation in intensity and consistency during one's discourse one's . . . *thinking* leading to one being *resituated* in a space unforeseen yet a space from which one can gain a better understanding if that is the correct word as if returning from a story whose speed exceeds that of life recently multidimensional I'm told a better understanding as I was saying of perception through attempts to represent dissimilarities as distances between points things people in an n-dimensional space you see using perhaps matrices of perceptual dissimilarities measures between physical stimuli multidimensional scalings attempts to represent the dissimilarities as distances between points and people and things – he says repeating himself, eyes wide open, incredulous – the consistency of findings and the complementary nature of the results in studies encourage one to extend the multidimensional model of being to other situations such as the arts music – he winces and clears his throat – the energy in the bones – he says with a sense of urgency – *in one's bones* one end of this dimension is concentrated predominantly in the lower abdomen you see and its neural network while at the same time one must do everything possible to avoid Manichean dualism dualism of any kind in fact and allow for multiple entry ways and exits! – he exclaims, eyes alight with excitement – and so avoiding any pre-established paths modes of comportment that may hinder one's actions thinking if I may call it that but whatever the self may be it is not a stable thing in fact not a *thing* at all! – he exclaims again – but a kind of process a flow which *is time itself* – he says staring at me happily with a big smile – there is no such *thing* no *substance* called time that passes we you and I *are* time experiencing itself as passing: our experiencing

of our passing our impermanence is what produces the perception of time passing it is being's passing its impermanence a kind of *becoming and going* if you will that is time itself! – he gesticulates excitedly – I mean the experience of time is a function of consciousness and self consciousness a function of memory and awareness the awareness of impermanence our own and that of all things matter becoming aware of its own transitory nature it may very well be that what we generally call time is not experienced by other sentient beings like animals for instance – he says calmly – maybe they live in a kind of eternal moment but it is the mutability the passing nature of consciousness of awareness in combination with memory that produces the illusion of time of something that passes which we call time a person's I mean one's mind one's memory isn't a neatly ordered file cabinet you know? but a vague and vast chaos of possibilities why as De Quincey noted years ago and Borges pointed out more recently one's mind one's brain is a kind of palimpsest consisting of strata that is to say layers of activity I mean a kind of chiaroscuro like a translucent amberine substance through which one catches glimpses bits and pieces of texts borrowed from other sources stitched together or interrupting each other texts with illustrations and sound tracks musical texts scores images in sequential order as one finds in films voices and arguments stories and narrative dreams a polyphonic structure in fact reminiscent of those massive choral works by Thomas Tallis it is by means of interpolation I mean by troping that the text becomes polyvocal a kind of hocketting if you will between different texts each an expression of a particular point of view or *views* each with its own *voice* if I may use the expression a combinatorial process a procedure of dialectic paraphrasing if you will producing semantic smears next to or near that is to say in proximity to the other texts such that at times they bleed into each other at certain nodal points certain points of contact producing textures characterized by discontinuity dislocation and *this location* incongruencies jagged white black and white jagged shapes puzzle-like slowly swirling round and round caught in a whirlpool blindly searching each others' edges words and their sounds their undulating shapes erratically erotically bumping into each other never quite fitting in all this leading to the text's resistance to being read as a sum of its strategies and subject matters where the work's total meaning is a complex a complex of meanings of course this requires that the reader use her imagination – he says squinting at the floor shuffling his feet back and forth – but she must use it to free herself from the fixed forms of thought that ordinary language imposes on our minds one has to move diagonally one jags zig zags irregularly a-periodically in and out of sense and non-sense while still allowing for gaps to show between any explanation of a reading and any actual reading assuming there is such a thing as an *actual* reading I mean the time spent away from the work the circumstances that interfere with it financial troubles for instance its inconsistencies and discontinuities that is to say the identity of the experience life itself continuous and articulated which is the only thing that allows for the narrator's attitude has disintegrated one can see this if one looks at the text I mean to say one's writing that is to say the entire body of the work whose elements occur as it were as a simultaneity that consists of the irregular the a-periodic flickering texture of a kind of frayed tapestry that unfolds in time which is to say the text is time itself unfolding the writing time writing itself the text is a fragment made up of smaller fragments arranged in bricollage fashion and therefore never reaching a unified state of completion as it is in an ongoing turbulent state of disintegration and reintegration – he halts catching his breath, then coughing and wheezing, he proceeds with growing agitation – the poets and writers of yore had already noticed this about the self that it is a multiplicity a swarm long before today's theorists did and who taking advantage of the general public's ignorance of certain details of the past of our history have capitalized on those ideas that is to say *stolen them* you see and made their posh academic careers out of them . . . human greed knows no limits whether you are on

the right or the left – he smiles facetiously – it is amusing that today our theorists many of whom proclaim the death of the author of the subject and talk about inter-textuality copyright their books as if those ideas belonged to them as if *they* discovered all this themselves while at the same time setting themselves up as heroes as *liberators* . . . hypocrisy takes on many and varied an appearance – says the old man smiling gleefully – whether you are on the right or the left or somewhere in between and if you are a student you had better conform oh yes! if not without a doubt *you will be punished* for they do demand identity – he stresses – of course it's all meant for your own good for the sake of your. . . *liberation* – he grins knowingly through the haze of cigarette smoke floating around him – still it is the theorists who have alerted us altered us that is to say made us skeptical about embracing any privileged account of something any privileged discourse by subjecting reigning views reigning orthodoxies to scrutiny and so uncovering their shaky and often faulty underpinnings all of which is necessary useful even given humanity's general obsession with power and control . . . most if not all such orthodoxies when studied closely reveal themselves to be based on empty arbitrary premises which have stuck over time by sheer force of repetition . . . or just by sheer force – he winks at me taking a swig from a flask he's suddenly pulled out of his robe pocket – they have shown us that language is not a neutral medium that rhetorical forms are intricately and inevitably involved in the shaping of realities that rhetoric is persuasive discourse and that all discourse is unavoidably rhetorical . . . all this reflecting a much welcome challenge to the language of objectivism . . . of course all of this would seem to be an example of objectivism itself after all – he chuckles helplessly –

nonetheless

if any of these these theorists these poets and writers had an honest bone in their bodies if they were truly revolutionary they would let go of their bourgeois family lives their posh and powerful positions their bourgeois lifestyles they would do as U.G. Krishnamurti did with his books which are not copyrighted and which he encouraged the reader to use freely in any way the reader wants truly they are shits the lot of them their thinking and acting is still deeply conditioned by social and biological factors they are completely under the sway of their conditioning the cowards! – he shouts – they lack the courage to dive into life's energy and madness like Artaud and Rimbaud did to embrace the madness they are merely privileged shits pretending playing at being revolutionary the bourgeois shits! – he seems ready to jump out of his chair – why I would strike out against them but the rule displaces . . . I . . . I am displaced from myself my body I've been displaced you see my body has been taken away from me – he says frantically – it's covered over by multiple descriptions someone else's descriptions of me my self ah ah – he gesticulates manically while gasping for air – aaaaah! I've got categories crawling all over me! – he screams desperately clutching at himself – like insects spiders shadows crawling all over my body sapping the life out of me distracting me tugging and pulling at me dissecting me! taking my thoughts away they take my thoughts away! – he screams again falling back into his chair, breathing agitated, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out another cigarette which he quickly lights and puts into his mouth sucking on it frenetically, he pauses for a few seconds stretching out his legs staring blankly at the ceiling and then, in a sudden burst, continues talking in a loud whisper leaning towards me – they have done this to me with their machines those infamous contraptions their x-ray machines and their MRI machines which they use to reconfigure one's body they in fact they remap one's body such that one that is to say I can no longer recognize it no longer recognize myself you see? they reconfigure the body's electromagnetic field and alter the electrochemical workings of the brain attuning it to those of the machine with which they control one's body from afar one's thoughts and feelings the ebbs and flows of the body's humors . . . they remap one's body you know? and project new different images onto it they de-territorialize it dismember one's sense of self one's identification of self with body they re-territorialize

the body in their own image . . . I mean they project images onto one's body thereby making themselves into Gods who have recreated us and therefore possess us in their own image do you see this? as if we were screens our bodies *are* screens and of course they project their various images as holographs not onto our bodies but *into* our bodies – he emphasizes pausing – it is *into* our bodies that they project their three dimensional holographic images so as to fit the three dimensionality of the body with its various organs and cavities taking into account the many layers and types of tissue I mean they project themselves into one's body they etch images onto one's bones with lasers and so by doing this they repossess . . . they tune one's electromagnetic frequencies to those of the machine and by means of phase cancellation annul the unique frequencies of our bodies imposing those of the machine with which they control our actions from a distance do you see this? – he asks desperately - I mean that is why one hears a crackling sound the buzzing of insects in the background a kind of electrical humming in ones thoughts a kind of white noise static in one's ears you see it is they with their transmissions constantly interfering with one's thoughts one's actions scrambling ones thoughts and desires with their holographic images imposed on the mind's eye etching their mark on our bones in effect *branding* us

- the old man sits motionless in his chair, blankly staring out the window with mouth agape and cigarette in hand. A long, thin string of saliva hangs from his trembling lower lip, gently swaying back and forth with each raspy inhalation – all the faces all the voices blend into one face blend into one voice . . . it is the silence that listens *it listens to our listening* this unfathomable eternal silence at the heart of things – he says in a trembling whisper -

* * *

Acknowledgement

Some sections of *Dr. Sarturnian's Monologue* are composites made of bits and pieces taken from other texts, whether in the form of a direct quote or as paraphrases, which when put together in collage or bricollage fashion, constitute the professor's "voice" or rather, his many voices. A list of these sources is provided below.

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Passive and Active Environmental Sounds

An Essay on the conceptual differences between two ideas of 'environmental sound' :
4'33" by John Cage and Intero by Walter Branchi

Despite being deeply influenced in my personal way of thinking and making music by John Cage, I have always sought to go beyond the limit of silence that Cage introduced to contemporary western music thought.

Premise

Determinacy and indeterminacy (the end of Integral Serialism).

One important milestone in the late fifties and early sixties, posed by composers from the Darmstadt school (Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, Henry Pousseur and others), was the awareness that many of the results they had obtained in their own compositions, involving rigorous determinacy (Integral serialism), had also been obtained by John Cage with a diametrically opposite procedure, involving maximum indeterminacy. Paradoxically, the two extreme opposites become one and the same result. Consider for example, the impossibility of performing Stockhausen's piece "*Zeitmasse*" (1955-56, for five wind instruments) – *exactly* as it's written. Absolute determinacy is impossible for a performer to perform. The score is intended to leave nothing to 'chance', but a performance can only roughly represent what was written due to the extreme technical challenge of its execution. This created an inevitable conflict between the compositional ideas, the formal transcription, and its performance.

About 4'33"

The work was first performed in 1952 in Woodstock (*by pianist David Tudor*). The idea of a "silence piece" came to Cage's mind when looking at a Robert Rauschenberg painting: a completely blank canvas. At the time, both artists were guests at Black Mountain College. The title seems to derive from the idea of absolute zero, equal to - 273 degrees Celsius, which is the lowest temperature theoretically attainable in any thermodynamic macroscopic system. (4 minutes = 240 seconds + 33 seconds = 273 total 4'33 "). Cage wanted to achieve a "degree zero" of music, as Roland Barthes would say.

For the first performance of 4'33 ", David Tudor chose different durations of "silences ": first "movement" lasted 33", second movement 2'40", and the third 1'20". The pianist indicated the beginnings of parts by closing, the endings by opening, keyboard lid. Cage wrote, in the explanation of the piece, that the work could be performed by any instrumentalist(s) and the movements could last any lengths of time (obviously within 4'33"). According with the American composer and musicologist Kyle Gann*, 4'33" is the most important musical work of the twentieth century, along with Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*.

For example

Cage has always considered durations and timbre more important than equally tempered system pitches. “Notes”, and their exact definition, are secondary in almost all of his pieces and are often prepared (modified) to become frequently indefinable or: ‘noise’. Other important composers like Edgard Varèse, Henry Cowell and Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza also include ‘noise’ in their compositions and performances.

4’33” makes the listener aware of the sounds of the existing environment, avoiding those produced by musical instruments, while keeping the traditional music context in tact: concert hall, musical instrument, performer, even the score. This fact is very important, because it allows Cage’s work, his “non-music”, to be accepted in a very traditional context. He sacrifices the notes, but preserves the ritual of the concert. During this same time period of late Dadaism and Conceptualism (*Marcel Duchamp*) there was a great deal of provocation in the arts. 4’33” was just as provocative as Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel* or *Urinal*. Certainly Cage was aware. “I was interested in the ideas, not just visual products. I wanted to return the painting to the service of the mind”, said Duchamp. With 4’33”, Cage announces a viable option shifting the very concept of music, as traditionally understood, as direct communication, person-to-person. Conceptually, Cage opens music to the world of sounds beyond the sphere of traditional music. Yet few composers have followed his example. Composers from the school of Anton Webern were not involved in Cage’s ideas, rejecting the extreme disorder of Cage in relation to their own concept of music (see Pierre Boulez: *Alea*; Henri Pousseur: *Chance and Music*):

From *Alea* by Pierre Boulez: “... *The most basic form of chance transformation would be to have a philosophy tinged with Orientalism that masks a basic weakness in the composition, would be an appeal against suffocation of the invention, use a more subtle poison that destroys craftsmanship.*” (1).

From *Chance and Music* by Henri Pousseur: “... *In 1958 John Cage brought out a new European journey and was responsible, among other things, to conduct a series of seminars about indeterminacy at the Ferienkurse in Darmstadt. The field was ready to receive his words, and they were in fact of substantial impact among his young listeners, less firmly attached than the previously mentioned composers (Boulez, Stockhausen, Nono, Pousseur himself and others) to the principles and stylistic problems specifically European ...*” (2) “.

Generally speaking, there have not been many composers who followed Cage in his attempt to change the very concept of music. Some of them gave birth to a kind of compromise, which was called Random Music. (See Karlheinz Stockhausen, Franco Evangelisti and others).

Entractes

Following are three short comments offered by composer-musicologist Michela Mollia, in response to the above text, that I find particularly relevant, enlightened.

First Entracte

*"It 's not by chance that 4'33" challenges the listener to participate in a completely different way with the very concept of music. I say "music" not "concert". In other words, it was important that the work be performed in the concert-hall; any other place would not have caused such strong reactions. The same applies to Duchamp: if **Urinal** had not been exhibited in a museum (= concert hall) nothing would have happened. Both **Urinal** and **Silence-** are out of context intentionally, and herby cause a public reaction."*

The silence Cage introduces with the *non-music* of 4'33" is radical. Within the context of both traditional and the contemporary music of that time, Cages work creates a huge divide a wall beyond which, continuing to write music with notes becomes almost impossible. This schism eventually turns composers back to neo-romanticism, minimalism or a total free for all where everything is possible.

Second Entracte

Proposing silence as musical material (a non-sound) could represent a kind of aphasia, a radical shift, that is a real outbreak. The realm of music with its physical and conventional walls and limitations, opens up at last to the possible.

Cage's idea of "non-opera," frees sounds from its cultural and instrumental constraints, and aims to make the world into a huge musical composition. " The substance of the message, despite its apparent lack of content, of music, is nevertheless a work of art.

Even Cage was not able to go beyond his 4'33"; in fact, he continues the idea of indeterminacy: typical of "void-non-action" of Zen Buddhism.

Here are some pieces composed after 1952:

- Radio Music (1956)
- Fontana Mix (1958)
- Cartridge Music (1960)
- Variations II (1961)
- 0'00 "(4'33" No. 2) (1962)
- Cheap Imitation (1969)
- Ryoanji (1983)
- But What About the Noise of Crumpling Paper (1985)

- Europeras 1 & 2 (1987)
- Four6 (1992)
- Trio Seven Woodblocks
- Only n ° 43 (Songsbooks-1970)

A QUESTION ARISES AT THIS POINT:

WHY DO WE HAVE TO MAINTAIN THE IDEA OF A MUSIC LANGUAGE THAT MUST EVOLVE WITHIN MUSICAL TRADITION?

LET'S GET OUT OF THE CULTURAL BOX AND CHANGE OUR PERSPECTIVE.

I have often asked: "What real revolution did 4'33" cause"? One answer might be that Cage's silence is the end of our traditional and contemporary music history.

Another question is: "How did I, as a composer, manage to overcome the revolution of silence in my own music?"

Consideration

The present tense sound environment that is the 'silence' in 4'33" is passive : the sound you happen to hear is what it is.

Whereas, in my music, environmental sounds are active because they are susceptible to interact with the type of music I compose. The sounds from any given situation become part of my work. My music hereby takes its form from the live active soundscape in which my work is presented. Many other elements become part of the music as well, my music is not limited to the composed sound and environment/noise relationship. The entire situation becomes active, the audience is within the work, they are part of the work, the place where the music is performed resonates, is vibrant, even the colors the participants clothes become part.

Third entracte

"I would say that while Cage prepares a void to be filled, you create a net. I can just think of the fisherman's net: the bigger the mesh, the bigger the fish that come in, the smaller the mesh, the smaller the fish. I apologize for the prosaic comparison, but this metaphor comes to mind. Your sounds, your compositions, your forms, are like a net through which the world and all of its distinct characteristics including sounds pass. What passes or does not pass is determined by the degree of perceptual attention that each listener engages. The net you create is alive, listeners have an active role in deciding what to listen to. While Cage renounces putting a defined object (a musical composition) between himself and the world, your music becomes the world around your listeners. You meticulously design the transparent form that can hold the world. "

This is a way of thinking about music that has nothing to do with traditional composition. I am thinking outside the box. I arrived at the "sound of silence" not as a consequence of

avant-garde language, but through *systemic* thinking, and making, of constructing within the fundamental elements of sound.

The principal of *systemic* thinking is that everything is interrelated. Let me explain. A system is formed by a set of internal relationships between components that simultaneously relate to the whole. Considering this principle, any system has a relationship to both to the interior and exterior world. A musical composition is at the same time systemic and a system. It is both part of a whole and separate. This means that it is the system itself, because it consists of parts and at the same time is part of larger systems such as places or environment. Its exterior is directly related with its interior; they are integrated; one evolves from the other. The listener who is also a 'system', vibrates along with all the things that resonate within the active time and space.

The *systemic* music I compose is not in conflict with the environment, the environment is the host of my music and visa versa. The *non-sound* of Cage's "4'33" is such a radical contrast to the traditional concert situation. The contrast is the meaning of the 'composition', just like Duchamp's *Urinal* in the context of art exhibition.

The meaning of my music lies in it's cooperation with the context. My music becomes part of the whole. The unity that is the vital element, that brings the work to life.

The situation itself where my music is performed is very much a part of the composition. I choose the place, the where and how to perform my music. This choice of situation is part of the composition.

Three key ideas relating to my music:

- The composition is man made, it is the result of the composers imagination and knowledge of music.
- The work is conceived without beginning or end, as part of the ongoing resonance of the world. There is no "story" that excludes accidental noises. The sound of the world is part of my music.
- My compositions are constructed exclusively of electronic, dematerialized, disembodied sounds that have no history. They are very different from the historically laden sounds of a violin or a piano. Electronic sounds blend beautifully with both the natural and artificial sounds and "noise" of the environment.

Walter Branchi

(With three contributions by Michela Mollia)

Isabella Scelsi Foundation, Rome, December 12, 2012

* A text to look at for its quality and quantity of information about 4'33" is "No Such Thing As Silence: John Cage's 4'33". By Kyle Gann, Yale University Press, New Haven, London, 2010

(1) "Alea" by Pierre Boulez, published in *Incontri musicali* #3, edited by Luciano Berio, 1959, Edizioni Suvini Zerboni, Milano.

(2) "Chance and music" by Henri Pousseur published in *Incontri musicali* #4, edited by Luciano Berio, 1960, Edizioni Suvini Zerboni, Milano.

DIALOGUE

for live speaker and prerecorded sound

Jim Randall says,

What follows is a beginning.

And then,

starting now from here, a question arose

I ask,

Does experience sharpen experience or does
experience blunt experience?

And then,

A. I've heard it all before.
B. I've learned to hear it as never before.

: two ways to use imagination.

That was 1971. The question remains. It is about ontology. Being about the ontology of music, it is about the ontology of experience. And it arises under the observation of music experience as ontologically relative, as, in poignant fact, ontology creating: you can tell, from the compulsion to neutral placeholding names for things — what, here, now, it — to be given content by what follows or what fills: history determining ontology.

Jim Randall says,

(now: not a moment but a bandwidth)

(here: not a point but a bandwidth)

*(starting. from: continuing
in a direction
to be constructed)*

And then,

*starting from whatever bandwidth of now
most nicely mirrors the bandwidth of here
that most nicely echoes the bandwidth of now
that most fully contains an elsewhere and a future*

Somewhat later, I say,

what is about, is also of, also is :

within :

also everspecious metapresent worldnow,
somewhere, metabounded nowhere :
utterance within nascent sempiternal,
being, about to be of; coming, contained;
elapsing, incontinent; unshaped, urtexturous,
unextirpreted hereplace, anytime
immemorial, a leading edge of a vanishing
act, uncatalogued hoards of phenomenal
finds, allcomprehended within (without
benefit of theory). . .

William Gass says,

. . . very early, the philosophers kicked quality out of science.
Aristotle insisted that qualities were accidents and could not be a
part of essence.

And then,

The campaign against quality was a campaign against consciousness, because that's where quality was thrown like trash in a can.

Georges Bataille says,

The expression of inner experience must in some way respond to its movement — cannot be a dry verbal tradition to be executed on command.

And then,

Inner experience not being able to have principles either in a dogma (a moral attitude), or in science (knowledge can be neither its goal nor its origin), or in a search for enriching states (an experimental, aesthetic attitude), it cannot have any other concern nor other goal than itself. Opening myself to inner experience, I have placed in it all value and authority. Henceforth I can have no other value, no other authority. Value and authority imply the discipline of a method, the existence of a community.

The question arises and intensifies because the subjective reality of music, insofar as it's what anyone gets off on musically, is stubbornly disjunct from the intersubjective realities attributed to it, whether they be structures of expressive qualities or stories. Looking at it this way, technically, ontologically, music is always, necessarily, a 'mystery'. But people actually have mystical experiences. And they actually have trances. And they actually have transcendent inner experiences of music, which are, frequently, what they index when they think of music as personally meaningful and valuable rather than, maybe, as professionally defensible. Experiential mysteries are explained as to their probable causes and likely significations — structures of means and structures of references — but what characterizes *them*, ontologically? That is to say, what characterizes their quality and being as *experienced* by those

who experience them? — rather than, what surgically circumcizes them by explication in a causal-structure or referential-structure language. If, being “purely subjective”, they are “not-real”, what, then, is the ontology of “not-real” when it is vivid, specific, and tangible to consciousness? — maybe we don’t want to talk about a determinate “not-real”, anyway. But if these experiential entities have a tangible determinate identity in consciousness, but are nonetheless “purely subjective”, are they to be dismissed nevertheless as ontologically vacuous? If I’m not a convinced mystic, if I don’t especially believe in the paranormal character of these experiences, must I therefore deny their tangibility — their “reality” — *as determinate phenomena* of experience in the awareness of their experiencers?

Jim Randall says,

(vaguely;
(timelessly —

(certified by leftward-passing signposts —)

A dull redbrown glow
would have had to have passed
(— suffusing the inconstantly lifting, yellowpurpled darkness —)
across a patch of vision,
soliciting resonance across a mask of mind
somewhere in a tangle between purple and yellow.

(Anticipate.)

had solicited coordinates of dimension;
had solicited resolution into functional parts:

(Return.)

— (shapes perhaps;

perhaps things)

: a patch of vision (— framed in a trainwindow) —
 straining to become seen in a stretch of mind bounded by
purple
and yellow —

 (straining vaguely, as glow might;
 (timelessly, as inception might —
: bounded by purple eye and yellow hair.

(Stop.)

Jacques Attali says,

Exteriority can only disappear in composition, in which the musician plays primarily for himself, outside any operability, spectacle, or accumulation of value; when music, extricating itself from the codes of sacrifice, representation, and repetition, emerges as an activity that is an end in itself, that creates its own code at the same time as the work.

I say,

Theorizing is, right, creative work. And like all creative work, it has no literal direct applicability to anything else. Rather — like all creative work — its use is to be experienced, absorbed with experience, and suffused nonlinearly into the network of awareness. A person thus transformed will of course see and think differently from before, being of course a different person as a consequence of having a specific creative-intellectual experience.

David Burrows says,

People are their own most loyal listeners, for the sound of their own voices is a message to themselves as well as to others, a message of self-confirmation and self-sufficiency.

And then,

Hearing the sound of their own voices returns vocalizers to themselves in a new form, with benefit to their sense of consequentiality, for the sound, while completely unlike themselves in its radical immateriality, still is uniquely their own and is heard only as and when they cause it to be heard.

And then,

People who sing to themselves, in or out of the shower, are self-enfolded in resonance that leaves appearance and location behind. They sense themselves as a diffused happening that does not depend for its validation on this or that outside event or object or consideration, a flow with no pronounced sense of before and after, of first this and then that. In Hinduism, intoning the mantra Om is achieving union with the universe; but people who hum and whistle to themselves can achieve a temporary omniscience, since they are provisionally both self and other, or, what perhaps amounts to the same thing, they achieve a temporary return to that stage of infantile consciousness in which no division is made between within and without and the world is the resonance of itself.

The experiential ontology of music is not in its material facts or in its referential resonances but in its effects transforming consciousness. That is, the facts which are discernible within the spatio-temporal-mental field of a phenomenal episode designated as an occurrence of some music, the facts which are saliently the facts of that episode as music, are the specific successive states of awareness experienced by someone explicitly registering that event as an articulated, continuously evolving single-whole state of

awareness, or of experience, or of being, whatever vocabulary handles it best.

Transcendence, then, is not at all restricted to ecstasy, devouring passion, undifferentiated oneness with the universe, all-suffusing peacefulness, blinding sensation — Precise, vivid, specific, as experiential quality, the total replacement of the state of normal consciousness with a distinct state. Terrified of so much significance — that is, so much distinctness of identity in one's own experience as to be utterly isolated from the external world as a consequence of the most vivid act of experiencing it — people seek objectivity in and about their music. They invent an abstract ontology of qualities which are intersubjective — perceivable and denotable — on the order of green — pitch, say — and then talk about music as the composition of these qualities; sometimes they try to teach themselves, or are even taught by others, to actually hear music in this countersubjective flat empirical way, as if it were like discourse in its neutral rhetorical transparency.

But — just like compositions of pieces of normal language into intense expressive literary texts — music composed this way alchemizes under intense projective-compositional pressure, and is heard under comparably intense receptive-compositional pressure to re-materialize at another level of being — extra-intersubjective — that is, transcendent of its own pervasive intersubjectivity, of its assertible means, and unencompassed by its own heavily pre-intentionalized referential stories. It is, exclusively, ontologized as the sense which is sensed.

I mean, is Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony about B minor or is it about loneliness? Pushing to the extreme of contextual specificity on both ends, the most contextually unique construction of that music's B minor intensely constructs the *means* of its experiential character; the story of loneliness, carried to its most intensely non-generic detailed extreme, reports the *references* of the experience. Neither text captures the experience itself, anymore than anyone has described the experience of trance, or conveyed the ontology of mystical experience. What they are, at their highest pitch of vividness, are swinging doors into and out of focused music-sensing episodes, one structuring a concentration of attention on the way into an experience of a sensed sense,

the other envesseling the contents of a debriefing on the way out. How the sense which was sensed was about B minor can in no way be determined by, or determine, any sense however extended of anything which could be described as B minor, nor be captured under its terms or in its name. Picturing how the sense which was sensed might have been about loneliness is virtually to wipe out whatever meaningful cognitivity might have seemed residual in the word loneliness — and yet that word is a relevant intersubjective reference for the story of the experience, for the exterior behavioral resonance of that sense which was sensed.

Impervious to discourse, certainly; and impervious in principle to any one-to-one verbal or symbolic metarepresentation. But not, in principle, impervious to transcendent forms of creative representation whose own ontologies are outside the realm of one-to-one cognition — outside the realm, that is, of linear, normal-logical, cognitive-scientific thinking.

Kenneth Gaburo, in a text by Jim Randall, says,

What if a given composition was in your life?
What if your life was in a given composition?
What if the object to which you addressed yourself
would be a subject which addresses you?

Marianne Kielian-Gilbert says,

Discourse about structural relationships in music nearly always tends toward a separation of people and art, of mind and body. The structural is set off from its connections to the non-structural, the symbolic and metaphoric are cut off from the literal. The great and the exceptional are made larger than life, and therefore distanced from the human and personal. The structural/formal has the scientific status of repeatability and verifiability; the non-structural assumes a defensive position often at the mercy of logic and reason. The passionate is suspect; it is permissible in art and in the artists who make that art, but not in

the descriptions which communicate that art. These divisions extend further to the chasm between what we feel can be experienced subjectively and what we are able to establish empirically. Crossing from one side to the other is hazardous and rarely institutionally sanctioned.

Jacques Lacan says,

That a *Gestalt* should be capable of formative effects in the organism is attested by a piece of biological experimentation which is itself so alien to the idea of psychical quality that it cannot bring itself to formulate its results in these terms. It nevertheless recognizes that it is a necessary condition for the maturation of the gonad of the female pigeon that it should see another member of its species, of either sex; so sufficient in itself is this condition that the desired effect may be obtained merely by placing the individual within reach of the field of reflection of a mirror. Similarly, in the case of the migratory locust, the transition within a generation from the solitary to the gregarious form can be obtained by exposing the individual, at a certain stage, to the exclusively visual action of a similar image, provided it is animated by movements of a style sufficiently close to that characteristic of the species. Such facts are inscribed in an order of homeomorphic identification that would itself fall within the larger question of the meaning of beauty as both formative and erogenic.

John Rahn says,

. . . Following this line of thought reveals that the temporal experience {a, then-a} is itself abstract in an essential way: a-for-Mary is not a-for-John. According to the ontology referred to above, the notion of Mary-for-herself is Mary's ongoing project of abstraction from the temporally open set of all x-for-Mary. Such a set always has a most recent member, and may have an earliest member (though determinacy fades in that direction), but never has a final member — or perhaps just once, if one can be said to

experience one's own death, as opposed to the events of one's dying.

And then,

The abstraction of *m* involves the problem of intersubjectivity. How can John know *m*-for-Mary, or Mary know *m*-for-John, so that either person may abstract *m*? This is the domain of music theory: the construction of the interpersonal *m*. Mary and John negotiate some agreement about *m*. Language (natural or formal) is essential to this process, and *m* is spun into being out of language in the linguistic space between Mary and John. Any intersubjective entity is essentially linguistic, since only communication connects "subjects".

I say,

Think of the ontology of "*oy*". You can analyze it, and even generate it and successfully perform it as a sequence of "*o*" plus "*ee*". But its experiential ontology is not a composite of "*o*" and "*ee*", but simply remains "*oy*", ineluctable, integral, indivisible, impervious to analysis and to discourse.

The core problem of intersubjectivity is: how can I know my own experience? What means of mental exertion or interior formulation can I invent to acquire compositional and performative access to what I have already undergone, but not, as I wish it, fully experienced? Communication with others is a fringe benefit. Find the right practice, the right story for yourself and you have what you're looking for. Ontological paranoia will impel you to defend its interpersonal virtues with passion and aggression, but that's defensive: your reality is at stake. Metamusical texts in the rhetoric of discourse are highly unlikely candidates: because the issue with words — with voice — is the same as the issue with music: whatever natural sympathy I feel for the people who are trying to characterize music by way of narrative-structure models, it seems to me highly problematic to try to explain

something by reference to something else which is ontologically even more obscure. Better, probably, to recover the ontology of verbal-expressive phenomena by analogy with music — or, even better, in the form of music — that is, by discerning the non-verbal meanings which are the force and effect of significant encounters with significantly composed expressive verbal texts — such as poems, novels, works of transcendently reinvented discourse, or the writings of Jim Randall. The experiential ontology of a poem is an *extraverbal*, *extrapoetic* phenomenon indissolubly tied to the words discerned as the poemtext. The experiential ontology of a music is similarly an extrasonic, extramusical phenomenon tied to the sonic particulars discerned as musictext. Think of poetry as just one mode of a species of utterance, language become transcendent under compositional pressure, which could be called ‘virtual language’; metamusical utterance, transcending language and the rhetoric of discourse this way, attaches at minimum to the territory of experiential sense which is sensed as music. Metamusical music, similarly transcendent in being nonreferential, nonmimetic, non-one-to-one, nonlinear, autonomously time- and ontology-creating in relation to its objects of reflection, too. Jim Randall’s “How Music Goes”? well, that’s just Jim Randall’s experience of the *Sleeping Beauty*; yes: what else is there?

Jim Randall says,

now and here
layered to whatever depth
heard in the remote foreground
through layers of shaped and tinted glass
(each layer shaping and tinting
the compositely shaped and tinted composite)
layers tailored to my choice, mixed to my metaphor
tinted shapes not given but chosen
given by my choosing, by a construction of mine
(whoever I am —
if I am)
chosen by me whom I am constructing to mirror my choice
(framing some echoed thought of ours)
((me not given but chosen))
constructed to echo a foreground I wish to see
shaped and tinted as I wish to see it
deeply layered as I wish to see it
maximal diversity maximally cobering
maximally cobearing

the tinted shapes of now and here stuffed full
holding much that was deeply you
(echoing me whom I am constructing)

stuffed
shaped
tinted
layered
tailored to my choice
so that I may learn to choose
so that I may learn to learn
so that I may learn what wish to choose to construct
so that I may learn how to learn to sweep clean

(Revolutions
can wait —
and start now
from here)

I say,

[a 5' metatextual reflection in pianosound]

http://the-open-space.org/boretz_i-say/

11.4.90

for a symposium in Oakland, California
on the writings of Jim Randall during the 1970s

JKR After Life

My father told me once of a conversation he had with a friend. The friend said that of course she believed in heaven: “who wants to believe that when you’re dead it’s all over and you’re just gone?” and my father, smiling, raised his hand. “Me! I want that!”

I was traveling in England when my father died. My last conversation with him was via transatlantic phone call. When my mother handed him the phone, I could hear him struggling to say “Hi”, breathing with difficulty. I said “Hi, Dad! I can hear your voice!” and he said, with careful and deliberate enunciation, “It’s good to hear your voice, and the voices of children.” That used up his energy and he gave the phone back to my mother.

When the visiting nurse left that evening, she said “Goodnight, Mr. Randall. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He said, “I won’t be here.” He died later that evening and was cremated immediately, his ashes returned to the family home in a white cardboard box.

Some months after his death, my father appeared to me in a dream. Although the dream took place in a low-ceilinged room, my father inhabited a different space; there was no ceiling over his head, and a different floor under him (tan-colored, with a grid as if drawn for an exercise in perspective). There were rays of light emanating toward me from somewhere behind him. My father was resplendent in a hunter-green velvet suit over a white shirt with black and white ruffles at collar and cuffs. He looked wonderful; trim and vigorous, with full grey hair and beard. I said, “you look great! Let me take a picture!” but I had to go get my camera, which was in another part of the building. When I returned with the camera, I found my father sitting at a picnic table in the low-ceilinged room, dressed in a t-shirt and battered suit jacket, overweight and balding. I said, “What happened to your beautiful suit?” and he replied, “the ruffles caught fire and it burned up.”

I don’t know whether my father achieved his wish of being just gone or not, but I know that we are still here, however temporarily, to remember him. In that spirit, here are some highlights from the JKR memorial blog (<https://blogs.princeton.edu/memorial/2014/06/james-randall/>), with additional photos. I begin with an approximation of the memorial service held at Princeton on 14 June 2014.

-Beth Randall

Scott Burnham:

“Hey Scott: Jim Randall here”

Those are the words I heard on my phone message machine whenever Jim would come calling. Jim possessed a distinctive quality of voice. There was a unique music in his speech, the music of his all consuming intelligence, the fierce attention he paid to the world of things that interested him. When he talked, it was as though he was turning that world into his own personal music. It wouldn't be going too far to claim that this quality of voice is a clue to Jim's ethos, because Jim stayed close to this music; he maintained an oblique relation to the world around him, which had the effect of lifting him off of background reality, making him larger than life. And yet, he was not removed. I was always amazed at the quality of his attention: when he applied that attention to you, it could be both intimidating and exalting. One of my favorite kinds of interaction with Jim was when we would sit around with Ruth and engage in free-wheeling conversation. Those were relaxed hours, full of laughs and insights, small talk and big talk. Jim and Ruth have taught me much about any number of things, not least what a “marriage of true minds” can be. I am endlessly grateful to them both.



Jim Randall, 1950

Richard Howard:

When death occurs in the family – and I am using family in the one sense where the notion of human intimacy freely applies – we usually remain more aware of what is gone than of what is left.

Yet when Ruth Randall called last week to tell me Jim had died, I was at once aware that what had been left to me of my friend had immediately engulfed what was gone. This has never been my awareness on the occasion of other family deaths.

I had first “known” Jim in early childhood (during pre-school hours at Park School in Cleveland Heights) and then, more memorably, during English and Latin classes and home-room intervals from Eighth Grade to Graduation from Shaker Heights High School, and lastly, most variously, at Columbia College, Columbia University, where we roomed together in the dorm next to Hartley Hall, our classroom building, and where –always to my shameful defeat – we compared papers, an exercise whereby I could have no doubt of Jim’s academic or at least intellectual superiority ... except that he neglected to make such superiority explicit to me, or even to acknowledge my inferiority. (I was to see Jim perform the same sort of intolerable ascendance over his father many times).

But the enigma, as I meant to begin by saying, is that Jim Randall (whom I saw no more than five times in the last fifty years) has never left me. He has remained – he remains – the most valiant, the most valued, and the most invulnerable of all my playmates, all my scholars, all my loves.

Hubert Howe:

I was all of 17 years old when I arrived in Princeton. The first music class I took was Music 105-106 with Professor Jim Randall. It was probably one of the most unusual introductions to music theory given anywhere, but I began to develop a good understanding of tonal music immediately from his unique presentations. I also began to form a close relationship with Jim. He was very gracious in being willing to meet with me for hours to discuss not just the materials in class, but all kinds of topics about music.

We would have long conversations about what makes music coherent, and those conversations continued throughout my time at Princeton. Jim was not someone who learned what he knew about music from reading books or taking classes. He attended three of the finest Ivy League universities, but he almost never had anything positive to say about those places, except for Princeton. He learned what he knew about music by studying it, both as a performer and as an analyst. Those who knew him would come to understand that he had unique insights into all aspects of music. It was always a revelation to talk to him after we had both heard a piece of music, either new or old. Jim had the uncanny ability to listen to a new piece, or to see any kind of situation, and immediately put his finger on the essence

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of the problem. You can see that in many of the articles and reviews he wrote over the years. When I began to use the computer, I had the opportunity to work with Jim on some of his theoretical ideas, and the result of this became my first article, which was published in *Perspectives of New Music* in 1965. Shortly thereafter, he started going up to Bell Telephone Labs to work in computer music, and I soon started working with him and Godfrey Winham to write Music 4B. As they say, the rest is history. Jim wrote the first great computer music that I ever heard, and in fact it was his music that convinced me of the potential of that medium. I am proud of the fact that I helped him put together the tape of his piece *Mudgett: Monologues of a Mass Murderer*, and I was there when he produced his incredible masterpiece *Lyric Variations for Violin and Computer*. The original set of computer variations culminating in that section he sometimes referred to as the “jungle” remains one of my all-time favorites. With Jim’s passing, I have lost a great friend and mentor. I will always cherish the moments I got to spend with him, and I will never forget the things he taught me.



Jim Randall and Ben Boretz at NYU, 1967

Benjamin Boretz:

Jim Randall: An Autobiography

Jim Randall was always a huge creative-music-intellectual revolution waiting to happen. And it did happen, though – necessarily given its deep and complex nature – it happened in a small bubble, an intense but publicly obscure subculture lodged firmly, vibrantly, restlessly, sometimes obstreperously, in Princeton. I actually first knew of Jim several years before I ever met him, when I was immersed in the music department of UCLA, where my officemate was Bill Malm – the

ethnomusicologist who was writing a landmark book on Japanese music – who had been at the U.S. Naval Conservatoire with Jim (and Bill Evans, and Robert Hickock – coincidentally one of my principal undergraduate music professors). Bill showed me music of Jim's that had impressed him and whose scores he treasured – pieces that Jim composed scrupulously working out of Hindemith's theoretical prescriptions in *The Craft of Musical Composition* – sparse, straight and to the point music that clearly was passionately interested in thinking clearly and deeply rather than mugging, flirting or seducing. That was 1957; in 1959 Milton brought me to Princeton, for the Seminar and beyond; Jim in the flesh was there, as were David Lewin and Godfrey Winham; Jim was on leave, preoccupied with the recent birth of Tommy, but came to hear the great men (of course men!) and join the conversation with stunning force: see his vignette of Stravinsky in the *Perspectives* memorial issue; and – prepared with a comprehensive analysis of Elliott Carter's First String Quartet's pervasive pentachord structure – he succeeded in eliciting from Elliott an indignant denial that he had had anything "serial" at all in mind. And from the first moment – of infinitely many more – that I sat around with Jim shooting the breeze I was amazed to find an almost uncanny shared sense of what we cared about, responded to, valued in music – and creative thought generally. Powerful enough to propel a subsequent lifetime of inter-engagement on every level of being and thinking that you can imagine. Historical, political and social consciousness were inseparable aspects of this conversation, as were a radical critique of music pedagogy, a radical openness to every mode of creative expression, and a radical relativism about perception and interpretation. This was the time of the Taneiev review that Richmond Browne dared to allow into the *Yale Journal of Music Theory*; of *Pitch-Time Demonstrations* and the logical construction of the tonal system, liberated by the example of Milton's exuberant Positivism, and constrained by the severe moral rationality of Godfrey looking over Jim's shoulder and teaching by example. Jim was the one who had the unblinking courage of all their convictions – and an uninhibited entitlement to articulate those convictions in force, in public, and with an authenticity of voice that we had never heard before in the preternaturally cautious and evasive rhetorics of academic discourse. And then *Perspectives of New Music* came into being, and the American Society of University Composers, and *Compose Yourself*, and – finally – Open Space.

But discourse was the periphery; the center was always creative composition and wherever that led; inevitably it led first to the creative liberation of computer sound synthesis – to *Mudgett*, to *Lyric Variations*, to *Eakins*, recently to the *garland of csound* – to the constant refinement of language by way of music – to "Soundscroll", to "Depth of Surface", to "Intimacy" – and to the expansion of the ways that music goes by way of how language – poetry, story, utterance – goes. The piano music for Godfrey called *such words as it were vain to close* – immortalized by Elaine Barkin's textpiece – was originally called "a long story". And expanded further to the creative liberation of realtime interactive time-making, in sound, oftentimes of a musical character, but also in modes of social and material configuration that could only deeply be perceived as rooted in music and the awareness that music uniquely accesses. The work of that time, inscribed in the Inter/Play series, including an amazing set of 13 duo-keyboard sessions we played alternately at Jim's house here in Princeton and at mine at Bard, and writings like "Are You Serious", resonated through all of Jim's later musical and verbal utterances – through *Gap*, through *Schwejk*, through *Benfest*, through his latest – *to Astonish the Roses*, an email conversation with Walter Branchi, and, just now, *Bobfest*, a pure unabashed MIDI meditation on Hart Crane words, composed early this year for Bob Morris's 70th birthday.

Of course I don't know what my work and presence meant to Jim's life and work; he himself wrote, in the Introduction to *Being About Music*, and in Part I of *Compose Yourself*, about our

parallelisms and affinities. But I do know that my often unsteady hands were often steadied by the unfailing sureness of his. Jim's own deep surface, the emanation of his personal presence, were always the ultimate Demonstrations of his unconfinably farseeing thought.

Peter Westergaard:

Jim and I first got to know each other in the early 60s. We'd just missed each other in graduate school in the mid 50s. Jim was a couple of years ahead of me in college, but after college he spent four years "defending his country by teaching harmony at the U. S. Naval Conservatoire" and so did not get to Princeton until just after I left.

By the early 60s we were both ensconced in teaching jobs—I at Columbia, Jim here—but we had both become deeply involved in various high-minded projects that we hoped might improve the musical world—or at least our corner of it. It was a time of tumult and invention. All kinds of institutions that we take for granted nowadays—*Perspectives*, new music ensembles, you name it, were being born. But the one Jim and I worked on together didn't survive: the American Society of University Composers, or "Ass-suck" as Jim was careful to pronounce it. Its central premise was that the American university is not just a convenient provider of day jobs for composers who obviously could not make a living by composing. It is—or at least could become—an institution particularly well suited to serving the interests of serious minded composers in all kinds of ways.

A goodly bunch of such composers got involved—lots of young Turks, Ben and Tuck among them, many, but not all, with Princeton connections. And we managed to put together three successful national meetings, with talks and panels and concerts, and to publish the Proceedings thereof, when—to put it politely—rumblings of discontent were discerned. What kind of "Society" was this, anyway? How come all the members of the board were of the same compositional stripe? And who gave them the right to guide the Society anyway?

Well of course they were right. We weren't elected. We'd selected ourselves in order to create something we thought was necessary. Much discussion among the Founding Fathers and many a plan proposed, but it was Jim's plan that won out: we should simply resign en masse, say we've done our job, and it's all up to others now. (I can still remember the look on the faces of some of the complainers when they heard this.)

Paul Lansky:

J K Randall memory-shots

1966, fall, At Godfrey Winham/Bethany Beardsley's house, I hear *Lyric Variations* (violin and computer, on tape) for the first time. Whoa, I didn't know this option, This changes everything. Variations 6-10 were famous for taking 9 hours to synthesize on IBM 7094 mainframe, but the evolution of the opening solo violin tune C-D-F... was entry into a strange new world. The work's 20 minutes flew by, and the piece even survived the performance on a crummy Wollensak tape

machine of Godfrey's. I never imagined music could be like this.

Late 70's, my house: Jim is sprawled on living room couch with our cat William on his chest. William is nibbling on his earlobes. (William was weaned too soon.) This was William's idea. He knew an animal lover when he saw one. Purring like a hotrod William gets carried away and takes a bite out of Jim's nose. Jim wears a bandaid for a week. Jim communicated directly with animals.

Circa 1972, Woolworth Center, Princeton: Walking by the tape studio I hear wonderful separated clouds of sound. Turns out to be JKR's music for the film *Eakins*. Again I'm struck dumb. This reframes the argument for my soon to be first computer piece, *mild und leise*.

As with many of Jim's pieces I have a vivid memory of my first hearing.

Sometime mid 1970's: On more than one occasion I've heard Jim proclaim that he has no sense of humor. He claimed he didn't 'get' jokes. Hah. A group of us, me, Jim, Milton, Ben, Claudio, had driven to NYC for a concert and were at the Lotus Eaters restaurant on 5th ave and 23rd street. Jim places his order and before the waiter can ask Milton for his Jim adds "...and a bowl of warm milk for my dad here." (Milton was quick and said something like "skip the milk, I'll go directly to the beer.")

Sometime in the mid 70's: Jim and Ben put together a new approach to graduate education — the seminar begins early afternoon on Monday, takes a dinner break at the Ground Round, meets all evening and wraps up the next morning. The subject was Beethoven's op 110 piano sonata. At one point the agenda was to have the group teach Jim how to play it. But, Jim had no difficulty. I'll never forget the aura surrounding those opening Ab major chords in his hands. The new seminar model only lasted one semester.

Early May, 1970-1991, sitting on the panel with Jim during dozens of MFA oral exams. Jim took a lot of airtime but he never (well almost never) asked a question to which he knew the answer. This approach became my model of education: your job is to teach the student how to learn, not how to read your mind. 1983, June: I pass by Jim's office and am surprised to see him cleaning it up. (Not that it needed cleaning.) I ask what's up and he explains that he has just turned 54, which was the age the men in his family died of heart failure. He had now passed that age and was confident that he would be around for a while.

Jim was a lucky guy. He had a great family life, brains, talent, patience and a job that allowed him to exercise them all. I'm sure that during his 85 years he was never idle, and found almost everything to be interesting and worthy of his attention, And he had extraordinary powers of concentration. I can't even imagine Jim being bored. He had his wits about him until the day he died. He was passing in and out of awareness as he lay there, but when I mentioned that the NY Philharmonic was performing Steve Mackey's *Dreamhouse*, a piece he loved, he smiled and gave that familiar Randall thumbs-up sign.

Steven Mackey:

Jim (J.K.) Randall (1929-2014)—Out of View of Anything Resembling the Mainstream

During my first week of teaching at Princeton in the fall of 1985, Jim Randall walked up to me and said, “Hey Steve, let’s improvise: you on the electric guitar and I’m thinkin’ that I’ll try the front end of the piano.” Any part of the piano—the back, the under carriage, the legs, inside, outside—it was all fair game to Jim, and he was never one to make assumptions. He knew guitar players that played with a knife and fork, but he knew that wasn’t me and he wanted me to be in my wheelhouse so he figured he would play notes on the keyboard.

Jim would put a 90-minute cassette—45 minutes a side—into the tape machine, hit record, and we would play non-stop until the cassette clicked off. Then we would immediately sit and listen to what we had recorded. We did this a few times leading into fall break that year, but during fall break we took it to another level. We met, three times a day for seven days straight—10 a.m., 3 p.m., and 7:30 p.m.

I have to admit that I had a need to impress Jim with the virtuosity of half-remembered licks from my childhood. I used them up by the end of the first day and by the end of the second day I was truly present. To aid in purging my prefabricated riffs he set a teddy bear on the piano and told me that he would take musical suggestions from the teddy bear and pass them to me, then I took suggestions from the teddy bear and passed them to him. Then I gave the teddy suggestions to pass on to Jim. Eventually all possible permutations for communicating via the teddy bear were explored.

He was a great improviser. He could be stubborn as a colleague (one always got the feeling that if you disagreed with Jim, it was because you didn’t understand him), but as an improviser he was quite flexible. His rules for musical interaction were simple: don’t try to control the other; don’t be controlled by the other; but always listen carefully to the other. The goal was to contribute something to a whole that was bigger than the individual.

Our post-improv listening and conversation deflected my musical destiny permanently. There was the obvious effect of forcing me to explore the electric guitar in a new context. More profoundly, I noticed that the parts I liked the most violated all sorts of taboos that I had learned in graduate school. My favorite parts had various manifestations of awkwardness that I would have never “thought of” but that had real character, humanity, and curiosity.

Jim’s own music exemplified human oddity. It certainly did not aspire to impress or even express; it revealed. He was way out there. His *Gap* series of piano pieces are truly marvelous and quirky in the extreme. Thirty-minute piano pieces made from one note at a time and each note the vortex of a thousand trajectories. Or his *Scruds and Snorts* (I think it was called), where he had the idea to realize some of his most unsatisfactory, dysfunctional, and previously abandoned pitch charts and give musical voice to crippled logic. It was like listening to my father try to talk after his stroke.

Jim achieved notoriety early in his career as a pioneer of computer music. Any retrospective memorial to Jim’s work must mention his ground-breaking *Lyric Variations* for Violin and Computer Tape and his computer-generated score for the film *Eakins*. These are masterworks regarded by most as essential to the development of computer music.

I encountered Jim some 20 years after these works, and the Jim I knew had navigated a unique course well out of view of anything resembling the mainstream. Jim didn't just get washed up on these exotic shores for lack of ability to navigate the waters around the mainland. He could unpack German masterpieces better than anyone. In his last year before he retired from teaching, we, his colleagues, assigned "late Beethoven" as an area of study for graduate student general exams for the express purpose of hearing Jim tell us what it all meant just one more time. He could explicate objectively verifiable facts like key structures, Schenker spans, and pitch class sets, but he was most interested in what the music was really about or, more precisely, what music might conceivably be about. I remember him being frustrated with a student's devotion to conventional analytical tools. He said, "Beethoven wasn't throwing his bed pan around the room because he was worried about his fuckin' Ur Linie." At my colleague Scott Burnham's job interview some 20+ years ago, Scott presented work from his dissertation and quoted a metaphor from A.B. Marx. Marx had described a passage from Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony saying it was like "Napoleon mounting his trusty steed." Snickering filled the room until Jim stood in defense of both Marx and Burnham by pointing out the pathetic irony that we are more comfortable limiting the scope of Beethoven's music to tonics and dominants rather than with allowing this music any aspirations toward illuminating the recesses of the human psyche.

Dozens of times I heard him challenge someone who described something as "making sense," by asking them what kind of sense. His Beethoven, especially his beloved late Beethoven, was far removed from the normative example of common practice tonality that I was taught. It was, like Jim's own late music, radical and unsettling.

Jim was a high-octane intellectual, one of the few people in the world with a brain big enough to transcend the intellect. He brought maximum intensity to everything he did, whether it was working out a pitch chart, watching a ball game, or eating a ham sandwich. He chose to make music a rare and deep experience and not just Beethoven. He would choke up when Charlie Rich sang "When we get Behind Closed Doors" or when his favorite Irish tenor would sing "Danny Boy." He binged on Shostakovich long before that was fashionable. He once said that "Rachmaninoff is what all music should be."

Long after he was no longer a player in the contemporary music world he continued to listen, compose, and write with relentless integrity and passion, and his work had an enormous impact on those who were lucky enough to engage it. The single most enduring impact that Jim made on me was to embrace composition as a process of discovery rather than an explanation. He composed to explore what music might be capable of saying, not to tell an audience what he knew.

A Memorial for Jim Randall



Jim Randall, c. 1970

Jesselle Lucien: Ailey, Baldwin, Floyd, Killens and Mayfield (by Maya Angelou)

When great trees fall, rocks on distant hills shudder, lions hunker down in tall grasses, and even elephants lumber after safety. When great trees fall in forests, small things recoil into silence, their senses eroded beyond fear. When great souls die, the air around us becomes light, rare, sterile. We breathe, briefly. Our eyes, briefly, see with a hurtful clarity. Our memory, suddenly sharpened, examines, gnaws on kind words unsaid, promised walks never taken. Great souls die and our reality, bound to them, takes leave of us. Our souls, dependent upon their nurture, now shrink, wizened. Our minds, formed and informed by their radiance, fall away. We are not so much maddened as reduced to the unutterable ignorance of dark, cold caves. And when great souls die, after a period

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peace blooms, slowly and always irregularly. Spaces fill with a kind of soothing electric vibration. Our senses, restored, never to be the same, whisper to us. They existed. They existed. We can be. Be and be better. For they existed.

Ellen Randall:

Thank you everyone for coming. And thank you to all of our speakers; thank you for your wonderful stories.

Thank you to Marilyn Ham of the Music Department for efficient coordination of a lot of logistics.

Also, a big thank you to Doctor Pam Barton who arrived at 52 Gulick Road four days before my father died. She made it possible for my father to die at home in the breezeway, in his favorite pajamas, without pain, and with his wits about him.

Finally, one more “thank you:” to Scott. Scott has been a great friend to my father and my mother. He has been there through thick and thin until the end, with his reassuring laid-back manner – and a few witticisms thrown in. Thank you, Scott, for everything.

Now, I would like to say a few words about my father from my point of view.

It wasn’t always easy being Jim Randall’s daughter. If he was Saturn, his family was often orbiting on the outer ring. Sometimes, I was happy to be on that outer ring. I thought his music was weird. His intense intellectual discussions didn’t always feel enlightening to me. They made me nervous; like I was being set up and I’d say the wrong thing. I did like talking with him about people and what made them tick, though. And I liked going with him to Stewarts Root Beer for hot dogs and onion rings, and then to the Dairy Queen for dessert. And I liked it when he took me to the U.S. Open, back when it was held at Forest Hills. Actually, my father was a pretty good tennis player in his day.

It’s hard to imagine, but he also played Little League baseball. He actually bought me a glove at the sports store that used to be at the Shopping Center. Before we left, he carefully penned a “2” in front of the “5.95” on the price tag. That really flipped out my mother. He also taught me how to throw, admonishing me not to “throw like a girl.”

He loved baseball. Having grown up in Cleveland during the heyday of the Indians, he was an ardent Yankee-hater. In 1993, my father bought season tickets to the Phillies and he finally made it to the World Series; only to watch “The Wild Thing,” Mitch Williams, give it up to Joe Carter of Toronto in the 9th inning of the 6th game. But my father forgave him. He even sent Mitch a letter telling him how much he loved that series and thanked him for a great season. He was a softie at heart. And then there were the “other” sports. My father went through a Skee-ball phase. It was fantastic! We’d drive to Asbury Park and my father would feed us endless quarters – or maybe it was dimes back them – and we would play for hours. My dad was on a mission to conquer the Skee-ball circuit. There was also miniature golf. We drove out to Pennington almost every night during the miniature-golf season. And actually, we did become champions. I have a trophy somewhere to prove it.

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About seven years ago, my father decided to get back in shape, or, as he put it, to become “a hunk.” At least three times a week, he went to the gym to see Toni, his personal trainer. Toni’s good humor and attention made him feel like a VIP at the New York Sports Club; which, in his opinion, was only right. Seriously, I think it was only late in his life that my father became comfortable with the “father” thing. I think it happened around the time that he became enamored with being “Pop-Pop.” My kids are his oldest grandchildren, and they lived here, so they were the recipients of a full-court press. At first they were skeptical, but they grew to love the one-on-one four-hour lunches at Whole Earth and the Sahara. I think my father had mellowed. In his last years, he even read Faulkner out loud to my mother after dinner.

About a week before he died, my father explained his philosophy of life. It went something like this: “First, I think about what is most important to me. I ask myself ‘what do I believe; what do I feel strongly about?’ I weave these ideas together, think about the implications, and I arrive at a well-thought out set of principles that guide me; that I will adhere to above all else.” And then he looked at me with a glint in his eye, and he said, “And then, I cave.” In the end, I think he got it right.

Tom Randall:

Good afternoon and, again, thank you all for being here. I am Tom Randall, Jim’s son, and I am a professional musician and music educator. I consider myself very lucky to be my father’s son; his intense awareness of music has certainly shaped my life, if sometimes inadvertently. Your presence here today shows me that his passion for music and for engagement has moved each of you, as well.

As a young man I found myself at loose ends for a time; college did not appeal to me, music schools and conservatories did not seem right for me, and I was uncertain how to get out of the rut Princeton had become. Visiting my parents’ house one day I heard some interesting music wafting down from Dad’s room. I probably recognized it as Indian music; the Beatles had helped me there. The sound lured me up the stairs. Holding the Nonesuch LP got me thinking that someone had been hired to go to India and record this performance. That was a job I could imagine getting deeply into, so I started reading the album liner notes. Imagine my surprise to learn that the concert had been recorded as part of the World Music program at Wesleyan University in CT. I applied in the next cycle, auditioned for Bill Barron (brother of the jazz pianist Kenny Barron) and four years later graduated with the world’s strangest undergraduate music degree. I will be forever grateful to my father’s omnivorous musical tastes for opening that door. Many odd little reminders of my father have presented themselves to me in the last couple of weeks. For instance, I was driving on Rt. 1 not far from Princeton the day after he died, thinking of him and missing him. Scanning through the local radio stations I found nothing that would hold my interest; I suspect the problem was in me, not in the radio. Finally I settled on an intriguing piece (thank you Public Radio!), clearly a late 19th century composition. Although my musical preferences have never been Euro-centric I tried to listen to this piece as Dad would listen, hanging on to every note, breathing with the phrases, luxuriating in the dissonances and chromatic touches. I felt his presence there with me, as if we were listening together. I listened through to the end and learned it was by Debussy, no surprise. The surprise came next, when the DJ announced that we had been listening to the Cleveland Orchestra. Of course, it had to be.

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My father was a very “present” person, capable of many moods and reactions but always 100% engaged with the issue of the moment. He was well aware that his death was approaching, and he appeared to be very much at peace with it. In his last days it seemed as if he was keeping track, checking off on a mental list the people he cared about and wanted to hear from. On the afternoon of his last day even speaking a few words was very hard for him, and more and more he was using sign language or gestures to communicate with us. At one point Ellen and I were sitting with him when he grunted something like, “It’s OK, I’m pat”. In response to Ellen’s quizzical gaze I said “It’s from a blues verse, the Crapshooter’s Blues, “tell the boys I died standing pat”. To this Dad made one of his most characteristic gestures, which many of you will recognize; a slight nod of affirmation accompanied by a crooked index finger tapping on an invisible nail, meaning “That’s it, you hit the nail on the head”. Again, Ellen gave me an “I don’t get it” look so I explained. I told her that the singer wants to be buried with a \$20 gold piece, showing the world that he doesn’t owe any one anything, he could go out gambling right now if he wanted, that he’s “flush”, he’s all set. Again, the finger tapping and the nodding head. We all agreed it was a good way to be and we were happy for him.

A few hours later, after Dad had died, that moment came up and suddenly my mother said “I know! Louis Armstrong uses the line about standing pat in a version of St. James Infirmary. We listened to it recently, on a CD Beth made for us. Dad would have known that I – or we - would recognize it”. Upon hearing this, Ellen fixed me with a level stare and an outstretched index finger. She announced that I would be performing that song at this memorial. I agreed, but reminded her that the piece is a stark and deep song about loss and death. Ellen and Mom both said, “Of course it is” and here I am. I would only add that “standing pat” has a second meaning among gamblers; it indicates that the speaker is not drawing any more cards, though it may be their right to do so.

———segue to guitar vamp and song, a mix of Louis’ and other sources———

I went down to St. James infirmary To see my baby there She was stretched out on a long white table
So cold, so bleak, so bare Let her go, let her go, God bless her Where ever she may be She could
search this whole world over And never find a sweet man like me When I die won’t you lay me down
easy In a box-back suit and a brand new Stetson hat Put a twenty dollar gold piece on my watch
chain So the boys will know I died standing pat

Beth Randall :

Eulogy

Many years ago, my father informed us of his wishes for the disposition of his body after his death. It was Thanksgiving day, and we were all packed in the car on the way to my grandmother’s house, a captive audience for a monologue. My father instructed us that he wanted his body to be embalmed, or mummified, and arranged in a glass case for unimpeded viewing. The whole assemblage could then be put on display in an appropriate public space, for example the Grover Cleveland rest stop on the New Jersey Turnpike, in the men’s room. As our progress continued, he worked out variations on the theme; perhaps his body could be separated into several different pieces, to be distributed to different deserving rest stops.

As a little girl, I thought my father’s musings on death and dismemberment sounded about right. I

was gloomy on these drives, always anticipating a fatal car wreck. I expected my mother would drive right off the Tappan Zee bridge and we would all drown in the car. Stuck between two siblings in the back seat, my chances of escape were slim. At least my father had a plan for his body.

Later, he had a contrasting vision: "A Grandfatherly Rumination Pathetique leads to a Cheap Funeral."

My father always expected to die young. When he was a teenager he didn't expect to make it to 30; he figured he would get killed in some war or other. When he turned 54 he was gobsmacked that he had lived longer than either his father or his grandfather. I told him it was a false comparison, since his father and grandfather died at their own hands, one using alcohol and barbiturates, the other using a cut-throat razor. I told him, "if you just avoid killing yourself, you might last a long time."

Many of my childhood memories of my father are sound memories; the bips and boops of his early computer music; the muttering background noise of his late-night conferences with students; his forceful monologues and clenched, trembling rages; his piano playing, with his characteristic strike of gently pressing the key, letting the sound diminish a bit, then whacking the key on the release. This last is also a tactile memory; he liked to drum his fingers on the top of a nearby child's head, as if it was a keyboard.

Once, one of his students was on his way over to the house when the cat jumped up onto the guest's chair, and promptly puked all over the seat cushion. My father wiped the puke off with a paper towel, leaving a sodden mess which made him increasingly frustrated. "Turn the cushion over!" I said. My father was delighted at the result. "That's using the ol' bean!" he said; a rare and heartfelt compliment. My father's housekeeping skills were all at about that level. He mostly lived inside his head and his relationship with the physical world was that of an infrequent visitor. He could be strangely unobservant — thinking that cheap linoleum printed with a brick pattern was actual brick, or thinking that a coffee cup was empty in spite of the steam rising from it. He loved to eat, but his cooking was idiosyncratic at best: he combined peanut butter with tuna fish, or troweled a half-inch of ground pepper onto a steak.

As a younger man, the most exercised part of his body was of course his mouth, between chain-smoking cigars, drinking coffee or tea or mineral water, eating too much, and most of all talking. But he was also a vigorous dog-walker; the dog running off the leash, and my father striding purposefully after, swinging his walking-stick. I was out of the country when he died, but from far away I got the same impression of his swift decline; when death came, the door opened and he just walked on through.

[The memorial service ended here. The following are contributions to the memorial blog:]

Carlton Gamer:

Jim in all he did was much aware of "you", whether you were the piece that he was working on or his collaborator in making music in his basement or the reader of one of his published texts, whether you were family or friend or student, his cherished dog or Jeoffrey the cat or the "confident fawn" in his back yard, or indeed the mayor of Princeton Township.

When Jim composed, his piece itself became a kind of intimate other. As he once wrote, "I caress my song, surely; but this song caresses me back..." Together he and his piece created a soundspace, then filled it with striking and beautiful sounds. When was it over? "I'll know what I want when my piece is done with me."

In his writings Jim liked to address or confront you directly ("Let us explore for a moment..."), often in the very title: "provoked your majesty," "Are You Serious?," "it's all yours," or, famously, "Compose Yourself." He was much concerned with aboutness—that is, what does being "about" something entail? When considering descriptions of music or assertions about it, he probed and probed. In an analysis seminar in 1974, shortly after "Compose Yourself," in approaching Haydn's quartet Op. 76, No. 1, he asked: "What is the first thing you hear?" Someone ventured that it was a G major chord, a tonic triad. Jim, who once upon a time had defined a triad as a "maximal subcollection of nonadjacent members within an ordered interval-7-chain in normal form" and so on, was no longer countenancing any theory-talk. "What is a chord? What is a triad? What does tonic mean? What is G major? For that matter, what is G? A tone? A note? What is a tone? What is a note? Do any of these terms really capture what we're hearing? Hey, help me out here." We listened repeatedly to the beginning of the piece, seeking new ways to describe it, then shelving each successive attempt, until after a period of time we experienced the satori of hearing it unmediated by terminology or concepts. That was the starting point of our traversal of the rest of the quartet—a journey unlike any we had made before.

Equally memorable, in another session, was Jim's solicitation from us of a moment-by-moment account of the opening phrase of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 10, No. 3, an account collectively arrived at, the language of which was confined to such primitives as "first," "thing you hear," "moves down / up," "next," "lower than / higher than," "distance," "greater than / less than / equal to," etc. We listened repeatedly, refining our account. Then, having finished it, we let it go. Once again, we arrived at a hearing of the phrase unmediated by verbal constructs.

That same year I gave some presentations in Woolworth on microtonal systems, in one of which I dealt with periodicities of intervals in various systems. Jim spoke up: "Hey, Carlton, what does all of this add up to? Does it just spell 'Jello'?" At my next presentation, however, he showed up with an elegant series of pitch structures he had worked out based on the periodicities of certain intervals in the 7-tone equal-tempered system (or alternatively the white-key collection on the piano). That series I dubbed "Randall's series" and later used as the basis for a piece of electronic music, "Variation on a thing by JKR." I composed another piece for Jim, on the occasion of his 62nd birthday, entitled "Gahu on 'J, K, R.'" It is in the Gahu rhythmic style of Ghana and is for a speaking chorus improvising on nothing but the phonemes in Jim's initials, with a West African percussion ensemble of signature sticks, bell, axatse, gongkagui, and finger rings, directed by a master drummer.

Jim had the idea of trading places with me in teaching, which we did in 1981 under a Mellon Faculty Exchange Program. I came to Princeton that year and he to Colorado College, occupying my studio. His impact was predictably stimulating if occasionally destabilizing, involving among other things his encouragement of informal music-making by students not only in the classroom but in a variety of locations around the campus. When I returned to my office I found an object that had not been there before I left: a kazoo.

Jim had a physically imposing presence and yet could be light on his feet, whether on the slow-

pitch softball field or sometimes—when he took to venues other than his basement—in the act of improvising. His notions evolved to the point where movement per se, both his and yours, became a part of what he saw as a natural improvisational vocabulary.

I heard that Jim liked to brag about having once gone to the gym for 143 consecutive days. As someone who does gym workouts myself at the rate of a mere two or three per week, I can appreciate the prodigious determination such a feat would have required. Yet I'm not surprised to learn of this, as I remember how single-minded he could be once he had made up his mind to do something. I remember him telling me about a checkup he had with his doctor and being warned that his cigar smoking had induced a precancerous lesion in his mouth, at which point he announced, "Doc, you are now looking at an ex-smoker." Or, upon having decided that six (not twelve) was his number as a composer, his showing me a fat note-book in which he had painstakingly written out by hand every single partition of every one of the thirty-five hexachords, plus all kinds of other lists, including every subset of these and relations among the subsets of these, etc. Or his reading every novel of Henry James. Or his listening to every Shostakovich recording. I sat in on his seminar on Shostakovich, the "text" for which was a large set of taped excerpts, meticulously chosen and painstakingly dubbed in his basement, then duplicated for each member of the class, each set tidily enclosed in a box. Thank you, Jim, for everything.

James Dashow:

A part of this was read by Tuck Howe for me at the Memorial Service for JKR on 14 June 2014.

Living in the country, real country with dirt roads, roosters in the morning, donkeys braying well into the summer night, the smell of cow dung from the next hill over, I have come to appreciate weeds. They start out a tender green, grow quickly and often have robust and thorny stems, turning darker and stronger as the summer comes in. And a few of them produce truly stunning flowers with magnificent colors and fascinating shapes. They even seem rather aggressive until you start looking at the wonder that is their flowers. When I do that, I can almost hear them saying to me, "the weed is you." They seem to me to be a botanic version of Jim.

I knew him from day 1 of my Princeton years, beginning in 1962; he was my undergraduate advisor, the younger faculty person assigned to help freshmen into the university life. And he was my first music theory teacher at the university level, and he became a friend even in those short 4 years. As a sort of going-away graduation gift to me in 1966 he gave me a tape of Variations 5 through 10 from his *Lyric Variations* for Violin and Computer. They were the last violin solo variation followed by the "computer solo" variations. He was genuinely pleased and satisfied with the results; and so was I, and still am after almost 50 years. They were stunning, the first real composition of computer music; I do not hesitate to call the entire work a masterpiece, on a par with, and in many ways superior to, the more celebrated pieces of electronic music coming out of Europe around then. That was when I first saw the magnificent flower and fascinating shapes that Jim was capable of producing. The impact *Lyric Variations* has had on my own work has been permanent.

Jim was a kind of role model for many of us even before that expression became fashionable. Actually, there were very few of us in those years.... I was the only music major in my class; the classes before and after mine had only two. Which worked to my advantage in letting me get

to know Jim as teacher, composer and finally as a valued friend. As the years went by the Jim Randall from Jefferson Road evolved into the Jim Randall in Gulick Road, more thorns emerged to accompany the ever more intricate flowers. I recall the early Jim that always spoke rather disparagingly of orchestrational effects, "lushing up the sound" he called it. The later Jim valued the lushing up as much as other aspects of musical content. Gulick Road Jim had more students, attracting especially those who wished to study with a man with wide-ranging unorthodox views of what it meant to make and study music, at a time when the academic world was once more showing its ever present intolerant side.

He had, of course, an abundance of thorns. For those of us who admired his genuineness, his integrity, the thorns were the stimulating part of the plant that could produce those wondrously strange flowers, manifested as an extraordinary intelligence that expressed itself now with an uncompromising seriousness, now with ironic humour. Talks with him about anything at all were quite a bit like sparring; but he could take as well as give, and that was the fun of it. He always challenged you to think and observe, and appreciated a response that one-upped him (a rare occasion indeed!). A typical moment: when I suggested (for his weight problem) that he consider becoming a vegetarian, he said "Hey, I eat nothing but red meat. Some of my best friends are plants." In Italian, for "thorny" or "prickly" you would say "spinoso," a word that sounds to an english speaker quite a bit like Spinoza. I like to think of Jim as a mix of the meanings of those two similar-sounding words.

People who worked or studied with Jim never forgot him, even in the earliest days of his career. One evening while still an undergraduate I went to the Village Vanguard to hear the Bill Evans trio, the version with Chuck Israels on bass. It wasn't one of Evans' more memorable evenings, he spent most of his time with his head down level of the keyboard seemingly staring at his feet, his arms extended. A break consisted of the players walking through the audience in the tiny club to reach their own table in the rear for a drink or use the facilities... it was a week night, and Evans hadn't yet become the superWorldFamous Bill Evans, so there weren't a lot of people there. I managed to stop him when he reached my table and mentioned that I was a student of Jim Randall's at Princeton. Bill remembered immediately "oh, is he still down there? Say hello." For Bill Evans, that was being voluble.

I left Princeton in 1966, and after graduate school went to Italy in 1969 where I have remained. Contact with Jim was unavoidably limited, especially once I had moved abroad (email was still a couple of decades in the future, and fax was only found in offices). He came to Italy with Ruth and a couple of the kids, I forget the year, something like late 1970's or so, and we arranged to meet in Piazza S. Maria in Trastevere, a no traffic oasis with Rome's oldest fountain in the middle and a coffee bar with lots of outdoor tables and a superb *caffè freddo*. I hadn't seen Jim in at least a decade, and after a double take I find I am faced with his long beard (which he didn't have in the '60's), a bit of a paunch and something strange I couldn't quite put my finger on. Ah: No Cigar! I can only second Carlton Gamer's story above... when Jim learned of possible mouth cancer, he flat out dropped cigars: "Gentlemen, you're looking at an ex-smoker."

He then told me of his experience in Palermo a few days earlier, at the famous Monreale Cathedral. Jim with his Brahms beard, a loose fitting shirt to cover the paunch and his shillelagh walks past some workers who were digging some sort of trench, they see him and drop to their knees reverently making the sign of the cross. They thought he was a saint returned to earth. Saint

James of the Cathedral. He had perhaps the most acute and sensitive musical mind that I have ever known: capable of penetrating analysis on a first hearing of even the most complex works, without ever losing his ability to empathize with the emotional message of the piece. His nearly instant understanding of technical issues was legendary. The semester I was a visiting professor at Princeton, in 1987, I would often hang out with Jim. At one point I presented a seminar on my newly invented Dyad System; and Jim summed it up with a couple of concise phrases that caught exactly what I was doing. I have ever since been using those phrases as an introduction to my talks about it.

During that semester, my wife and I went out to lunch with Jim where he introduced us to his game he called "pinecones." This consisted in each person at the table in turn picking up an object from the table and placing it somewhere different, and in some way complementary or in interesting contrast (by position, size, color etc.) to other objects placed by preceding "players." The game was over when the players decided a satisfying arrangement had been created and it was no longer necessary to move anything. You began to look at the objects on a restaurant table with an entirely different attitude, which, of course, was the point of it all. This was quintessential Jim, in just about anything I'd ever seen or heard him do. Look at things differently and see how they might fit elsewhere. My wife and I still play pinecones at pizzerias, never failing to encounter enthusiasm from dinner companions along with the amazed looks from waiters. To close: Let us now praise a man who should have been more famous, who is still alive in those of us who had the privilege and good luck to be turned on by him. Great creative personalities are born rarely. Jim Randall was one of them. He will be deeply missed. Grazie di cuore, Maestro.

James Dashow originally written 11 june 2014 expanded 14 august 2014 Poggio S. Lorenzo Italy

Michela Mollia:

THE MUSIC OF THE BROWN OVAL SEED CASES PRODUCED BY A PINE TREE

Far away from space – I am sending a message in the bottle from Italy – and time –something like more than 35 years have passed since then – I wish to remember Jim Randall, JKR, sure he will hear all of us. I was very young when I met him in Princeton, being there thanks to a Fulbright fellowship, that allowed me, together with Walter Branchi, to work at the Electronic Music Centre where professor Paul Lansky was teaching and composing.

It was at first glance, meeting Jim Randall, that I realized he was placing himself within a very personal, autonomous, creative, way of conceiving music and, at the same time, expressing an enormous and complex depth of thought, very subtle and intricate.

I was amazed by the way he was gathering young students, at his home, creating a situation in which everyone could bring a record, of any music he/she liked, to make the others listen to, and then commenting it, exchanging opinions, ideas, judgments...

It seemed to me, and still I maintain this opinion, that it was a real way of "teaching"...attitude, that I suppose, was not in Jim's intentions!

But the most absolutely astonishing event was when Jim created his fabulous "pine cone games". I say "fabulous", just for what this word can also express: an imaginary and completely invented

“something”. I dare say, visionary.

Jim created his Pine Cone Games when in Rome, guest-composer at the American Academy. He told us that in a moment of careless freedom, maybe walking in the beautiful Roman garden where pines are a substantial and typical part of the scene, maybe he came across or bumped into some pine cones fallen from the trees...observing these strange objects, how beautifully they were done, taking them home...maybe it was a rainy day and he had to sit at the tables of the Academy sitting-room, just wondering what to do with them...

Anyway, an idea had to flash into his mind : to move these pine cones “in time” and when you join motion with time, essentially, you make music. You see? Very simple!

Of course, not “the” music western traditions testify, with scores, instruments, concerts, audiences, but “music” in the very essential categories of questioning and answering without words, but only with gestures that could be modulated in time.

At that point it was the matter of making Variations. In how many different ways one could move a pine cone? And what about being not only a soloist but a duo, a trio...?

When Jim told us the story, I was really baffled...Although I was a contemporary experimental music pianist, “that” music was really something, but I was totally fascinated. And still I am.

Jim came home and some time later on, I was back in Princeton.

Pine Cone Games had developed, meanwhile. Jim gradually had substituted pine cones with the most unimaginable objects: toys, little plastic instruments, puppets, kitchen tools; made of any possible material, and one can presume, of any sounding, possible material. But, it was not the sounds these objects could produce scraping on the surface of the table that interested JKR, not at all, but the Scene, the Theatre, the flowing of silent images, stories, one could create on that desk-stage, under the light of a desk-lamp. I perfectly remember how performances took place: Jim and I were sitting one in front of the other, like playing cards or chess. Each of us had our-own instrumentation, equipment, orchestra, at one side, hidden for the other player. It had to be a surprise the coming into the scene of a new object, an unexpected character. Nobody speaks, only, perhaps, our breathing.

And probably it is hard to imagine, but I perfectly remember how many different moods could emerge, from happiness or light-hearted situations to creepy ones. Movements could be of any speed, extremely slow or fast, calm or wild, composed or hectic, chaotic...

A Memorial for Jim Randall

At a certain point a friend of us started to make videos of these performances; other students, musicians, friends, were asked to play with him.

Time has passed since then, and I didn't have any possibility to play again with Jim, and either to share this musical, theatrical, poetic...how to define such a dimension? experience, with other musicians. I don't even know if Jim was still playing Pine Cone Games.

But I am quite sure he is NOW playing with anything he finds around him...

Walter Branchi:

A Jim

Ecco, ti dono una Rosa d'autunno in un vaso di cristallo perché tutta intera apprendala pazienza del tuo pensiero.



May 28, 2014
Arthur Margolin

Robert Morris

Jim Randall was one of the most remarkable and innovative musical thinkers of the last century. His brilliant compositions and writings are of the highest integrity and style; taken in chronological order, they provide a narrative of continual exploration and discovery that is as inspiring as it is unprecedented.

I regret I did not know Jim well; our only sustained conversation was in December, 2003 after the ceremony at Princeton announcing the publication of *The Collected Essays of Milton Babbitt* (edited by Stephen Peles, Stephen Dembski, Andrew Mead, Joseph N. Straus). However, I learned from Jim—as I have from other important composers—by listening and studying his music and reading his many articles, essays, and monographs.

I did write a long essay on Jim's music in Issue 7 of *The Open Space Magazine* (2005): "A collection of thoughts on Jim Randall, his piano piece *GAP6 I*, and some notions of 'gap.'" Recently, Jim wrote three compositions dedicated to me on my seventieth birthday entitled *BOBFEST – Ex.s D4&5*. The pieces have sub-titles from lines from Hart Crane's *Legend*, one of my favorite Crane poems. This may have been the last piece he completed before he died. I am so sorry I did not thank him for this gift; I was waiting until it would appear in the next issue of *Perspectives of New Music*.

Frank Brickle

From the first minute I walked in the door of the music department, it seemed everybody was saying, "You really have to study with Jim Randall." I assumed they meant, study composition. Eventually I got that the point was, not composition; everything.

Those of us who did work with Jim will forever find it impossible to think of a single aspect of our lives as musicians, or as members of a community of musicians, or indeed simply as people, that will not have been affected materially and profoundly and permanently by him. This bears repeating: His influence extended to every aspect of music — listening and hearing; creating and speculating; playing and practicing; learning and teaching. His own abilities in every one of these areas were formidable.

Far beyond any of that, though, what we were seeing in Jim was a way of encountering the whole world, a very rich way, one that had no time for false seriousness. Jim invested great love and intelligence and humour in everything he cared about. He was tirelessly devoted to helping any of us to do the same. All you had to do was ask.

One can only imagine how Jim would have reacted to the idea of anyone trying to emulate him. I would be willing to risk his scorn, though, to be able to emulate his generosity, justice, honesty. In a world where there are too few worthy people, Jim demonstrated how to be a mensch. It's only fair that we should try to follow him in that above all.

Claudio Spies

My son Michael told me that he had met Ellen at Reunions, and that she had told him the news of Jim. I was very sad to hear it, and I have been sad ever since. I felt so close to Jim and so regretful that I didn't see more of him. I am glad at any rate that he enjoyed his milkshake! (One could not but wish him that.)

I can't even measure how far back Jim and I go. I knew him at Harvard, for sure, and was delighted then that he managed to annoy that prig Randall Thompson with his cigars... Jim was a real Mensch, a good man. And such a musician. I'll never forget a class he taught on a late Beethoven Sonata (Op. 110) he played, and his honest puzzlement over something in the middle of the first movement. Later, back at home, I looked up the place in a facsimile edition I had, and found the solution to the problem: slurs in the right hand did not coincide with a larger slur in the left hand. When I showed it to him during the next class, he smiled broadly and I was delighted no less than he. I can't tell you how much I admired his musical judgment and his knowledge. Nothing could diminish that, ever. I shall miss him.

Mimmi Fulmer

It was a turning point in my life when Jim was my theory professor during my junior year. His wealth of knowledge, his generosity, and his piercing gaze that combined amusement, interest and challenge opened my view of what being a grown-up musician might be. It was Ed Cone who suggested I ask Jim to be my thesis advisor. I recall meetings with Jim (a notorious night owl) at 11 P.M. to discuss my work. He kindly and accurately assessed that my connection to music was through performing, and encouraged me to think about how music worked based on my strength. This led me to discover that each piece has its own voice and language, and is most interesting when performed to be most like itself, rather than like other pieces. Mostly, Jim inspired me with a profound love of music, and it is a privilege to pass that along to my students.

Lewis Lockwood

Jim Randall June 2014
A memorial tribute

1958: I meet Jim for the first time when I return to Princeton as the Music History Instructor after two years as a cellist in the Seventh Army Symphony, touring West Germany. Jim and I talk about all manner of things, music, art, sports, the world. I realize I am encountering a man of the rarest intelligence and force of personality. I happen to utter the platitude that “a work of art is more than the sum of its parts.” To which JKR replies with cutting force, “That’s because we haven’t learned to count the parts correctly.”

Years pass and we are colleagues in the Princeton Department, pursuing very different lines of work and interests, but Jim remains a good friend and a force of nature. He works mainly at night, so department meetings are scheduled in the late afternoon. He continues to combine brilliance with irony in a degree few would believe possible. He is the ultimate non-conformist I have known. We get along just fine.

1960s *Perspectives* is hatched, and so is the local electronic music scene, Jim is deep in both.

Jim is pursuing his own analytical studies, e.g., spending time with Haydn or Chopin or Scriabin, or working out an improved formal basis for Schenkerian analysis. He publishes his diatribe on Tanglewood, “Sight-reading as a Way of Life” which sums up just a part of his view of most of what goes on in the official worlds of music. We live through the Vietnam years in Princeton, which is torn apart like other universities. Jim displays fearless sympathy for the students and others who are against the war and demand that the university be on their side and shut down, but shows his usual insight in sympathizing with the students who are deeply concerned that if it shuts down they will not graduate.

1970s

In our later years in the Department, in the ‘70’s, Jim is moving into new modes of thought, writing action prose, composing with words. He writes about Tschaikowsky and Grover Cleveland Alexander with equal insight. The old rigor has been displaced by new ways of thinking and feeling but is streaked with insights that suggest the same astonishing outreach.

He gives the impression of coming back perpetually into the outer world from somewhere inside, from places few of us can imagine having traveled.

1980s: Doris and I decide that after all our years in Princeton – going back to 1952 when I came down from New York as a graduate student – it’s time to move on, and Boston looks like a livable city. I am moving to Harvard, where I try to help reshape things to be something like the former Princeton Department I grew up in – for a while, with pretty decent results. Jim and Ruth are sorry to see us go.

1990s and beyond.

Doris passed away in 1992. In the late ‘90’s I found a new life in my second marriage and I now have two grandchildren now in their teens. Through it all Jim Randall remains the most unforgettable colleague of my lifetime, a man whose special qualities of intelligence and imagination beggar all description.

Steven Gerber*

I came to Princeton as a graduate student in 1969 when I was not quite 21. Jim was my composition teacher for my whole first year, which was somewhat rare at the time, since the department rotated composition students for private lessons through the whole faculty. My first memory is that Milton Babbitt came into the room during my first lesson with Jim. I'd never met Milton and wasn't quite sure whether that was really he. When I asked Jim who that was he looked surprised and called Milton back into the room to meet me. Within five seconds Milton left saying something like "I don't want to interrupt you – every minute with Jim is precious." Indeed.

In retrospect, although I got a lot out of studying with Jim, I was not yet ready for him; I would have profited more several years later when I was more sure of what I wanted to do compositionally and was more articulate about it. In the late seventies Frank Brickley and I presented a concert of our music at Princeton (this was about six years after I had left Princeton) and then a week or two later we came down for a seminar with Jim and a few other students to listen to and talk about the pieces that had been on the concert. Jim's comments on the music (and the performances) were, of course, extraordinarily perceptive, and I was bowled over by the quickness of his ear. I'll never forget either the compliments he gave me about my piece ("Hey, this section's a knockout") or the criticisms ("Now here's where the piece really fucks up"). There was one section of my piece with parallel octaves among the instruments that sounded very disappointing to me and which I thought needed revision to make the voices go in different directions. I asked if anybody else in the room was bothered by that section and immediately Jim enthusiastically and cheerfully raised his hand. Occasionally I found his criticisms odd, but that was part of his charm as a teacher – sometimes his perceptions were so idiosyncratic that they made you think, even if you ended up disagreeing. For example, there was a passage in octaves for piano solo in the piece, in which the right and left hand were in inversion, and which I had had some technical problems performing. Jim's comment was "Octaves on the piano are about as much fun to play as to listen to." Later in that seminar he referred to the opening tune of another piece of mine, which I still like, as "nebbishy." Even now while working out details of a passage I imagine him playing the music on the piano, hearing far more than I do, and questioning the voicings and trying to re-write them.

*Steven Gerber died 28 May 2015.

Michael Pratt

At some point in my first year at Princeton, 1977-78, I picked up on what a powerful combination of ear and brain was Jim Randall. I finally experienced the full, joyful dose of Jim the summer before my second year. I was planning on my first try, with the PU Orchestra, at a Mahler symphony, No. 4, and asked Jim if he knew it and if so would he share his thoughts with me. He said he didn't, but would love to get to know it, and why didn't we sit down together and listen to it some evening? So I got an LP, and met Jim in a room on the second floor of Woolworth, and off we went. My astonishment grew, throughout two+ hours, with an ear that picked up not just close-together relationships, but connections between musical events many measures and minutes apart. None of which, of course, had even begun to occur to me. "Hey, that conductor just really blew it- go back three minutes and find that place where the horns take the lead. Doesn't this guy know that those two tempos have to match, or you don't hear that connection?" (All of this was without a score in front of him.) "That conductor" had not heard the connection, nor had I. I thought I had really learned that symphony; Jim showed me that I had barely scratched the surface. I now never approach a score without thinking of Jim, and of that evening. (Years later we did the same with Mahler 9.) It was humbling, but it was also some of the most fun I've ever had. He was like a kid in a great toy store, inviting me to play with him. He made realizing how ignorant you were an act of joy.

My other indelible memory of Jim is of joining him to watch the Princeton baseball team in the spring at Clark Field. He was a student of the game, and although he never really forgave professional baseball the strike of 1994, he still kept close tabs. But he knew the kids on the Princeton team as well as he knew the Phillies. (Jim also followed the Princeton team to some away games.) It's amazing how similar were the two Jim experiences- listening to Mahler and watching baseball. The exuberance and deep powers of observation were equally applied, and equally joyous to bathe in, sitting next to him.

I last saw Jim about a year back, when he came over to inspect our recently acquired English Springer Spaniel, Hugo. His comment was classic Jim- "That head is one of the architectural marvels of the universe." Jim was one of those people who saw as marvelous so much around us.

Mark Zuckerman

Jim's visit to Bard College in 1969 was instrumental to my coming to Princeton for my graduate study. This proved to be one of my happier life decisions, largely due to the work I did with Jim when I arrived.

Jim's classes opened my eyes and ears to a depth of musical involvement I could never have imagined possible; but once exposed to it I realized it fed a hunger I hadn't known was within me. I still reflect on these classes after more than 40 years.

As a composition teacher, Jim showed boundless generosity of time, concentration, and involvement. His got me to care acutely about every note, because he did. He was always supportive and encouraging as I was trying to find my way. Of all of my composition teachers, his was the approach I tried best to emulate with my own composition students.

As a senior colleague, Jim was a generous mentor, both materially – he helped me get university support for a record and for attending conferences where I delivered papers and took me along when he visited the Artificial Intelligence Lab at Stanford – and with sound advice.

After I left academe and even music for a time, Jim was supportive when I resumed composing, attending some of my local performances (despite his difficulties doing so) and commenting on recordings I sent him.

I owe Jim a debt of gratitude, both for my experiences with him and for the better parts of my musical self, which he nourished. But more important than this personal legacy is what he bequeaths to the world of music as a whole: the unique masterpieces of his thinking, creativity, and love. The world will never see his like again and was and is much richer because he was in it. He will be well-remembered and he will be sorely missed.

Barbara Herzberg

I know there will be many fine encomia and outpourings of love for Jim. I wanted to add a small contribution of my own to express how I felt about him.

He was larger than life and also very full of it (of life, that is.) There was nothing ever moderate about his opinions or his responses. I loved that about him. There are far too few of that ilk one is fortunate enough to encounter in a lifetime: though I imagine that a lifetime with Jim may have been somewhat "wearing" at times, but surely never boring.

I loved the way he called Ruth "kiddo." That word somehow so corny expressed years and years of deep affection. It sounded wonderful coming from that erudite mouth. I couldn't help an inward chortle whenever he used it.

Of course the years of mutual dogship are part of my picture of Jim. We always knew where to find Ethel, Phoebe, Sadie, if they'd slipped away: they were having "tea" with Uncle Jim.

If I had to choose an adjective to describe him, "Falstaffian" it would be. A greater compliment you know I could never give.

Moshe Budmore

I liked Jim a lot and admired him and his music. I was awed by his intellect and even intimidated because I could not always follow his flight of ideas and imagination. But my encounters with him were always inspiring, though often challenging, always enriching. His music is very special, and although it is totally different from what I write, I think I understood his music and could appreciate it. Here is something I wrote to Jim after listening to his music and I would like to share it, although I am not at all sure if I am on the right track:

After listening again I discovered something interesting: I have to be totally and actively engaged in listening every second to your music because every single sound is in itself meaningful. If my attention wanders even for a small fraction, I lose it. So your music can never be background, or being listened to Σ only with partial attention, because then it becomes meaningless. Maybe your music has to be listened to in a different way than how we normally listen to music. Usually we try to remember what we hear at the beginning of a piece and relate it to what comes afterward, and there is a development that can be recovered in most pieces, even when our attention wanders a bit. In your music every single sound, because of the essence of its "soundness," relates to the one that precedes it, so one has to be completely "with it" all the time otherwise one misses it. When I listened to your music I suddenly remember myself as a four year old sitting at the piano discovering the sound of a third and trying it on different places on the piano; relishing other combinations and enjoying high and low, loud and soft sounds in various gradations. In a way your music is like someone is discovering, and savoring musical sounds for the first time. (By the way I spotted the "stupid" right away, but would I have heard it if you did not tell me?)

Jim, am I at all on the right track, or have spouted a lot of nonsense? Anyhow this approach enabled me to somehow enter your musical world which is totally different from my, alas very conventional, world. For me there is a strange fascination in your music which is both simple and complex. Because it requires work and active involvement I have not yet tackled GAP 7 but am looking forward to it. I enjoyed our visit very much, you are not only an interesting man, but a kind and caring one and good company. It is a pleasure to be with you and I hope we will do this again.

Yes, he was a delightful person and I am sorry that we have not continued our meetings, but I think it was partly my fault, because I was in such awe of him that I considered myself inferior, thus trying too hard, always, to rise to his level, feeling failure when I felt I could not do it. So I did not try to continue our meetings which were very meaningful to me, but was afraid that they were boring to him

Frances White

Jim Randall was a great teacher. Working with him was exciting, maddening, inspiring. As others have pointed out, he was always completely present and engaged. He insisted on a total, unblinking honesty about what you were doing in your music. He immediately recognized that point in a piece when you were doing something, not because it was necessary to the music, not because it was the way the piece was, but because, perhaps, you felt you “had to create interest”; or you “couldn’t just have the sound sit there”; or whatever. He wanted you to question everything. After a certain point in my time working with him, I felt completely paralyzed and unable to compose – it just seemed like all of my motives and instincts were suspect, dishonest, and self-serving. But when I finally pulled myself out of the paralysis, I emerged a better and stronger composer.

One thing I always come back to when I think of Jim is that for him, music was totally and profoundly important, and he would not let anyone, be they a student or a visiting colloquium speaker, trivialize it. But I think that if he saw that you, too, believed in the vital importance of music, well, then it was worth his time and effort to help you recognize and transcend your own BS. And this is why I think that, although his critiques could sometimes be painful, they were always genuinely constructive. Because it really and truly wasn’t personal. It was about the music: that was what was important to him.

Jamey and I almost had to miss Jim’s memorial, because our elderly cat Pauline has been having health problems. I felt upset about it, but realized that of all the people in the world, Jim would understand and appreciate why we had to be absent (we made it to the memorial, but had to dash home right after). One of the things that we really connected on was our mutual love of animals. When I wanted to make a piece that used bird songs and nature sounds, I became very troubled by the thought that I was appropriating the voices of these beings that I loved: sounds that didn’t belong to me. Jim appreciated my concern, but he also felt that avoiding the piece was not an option, either. He said something to me that I never forgot (though I don’t remember the precise wording). It was to the effect that, for him, if he was going to dedicate his life to composing, then he wanted for the things that he loved best to be part of his music. This helped me to find the way in to making the piece (my “Resonant Landscape” installation), which included these sounds in a way that did not feel like appropriation. And this precept remains a guiding star for me as I continue to stumble along on the mysterious, frightening, and supremely beautiful path of music.

Elaine R. Barkin

March 2015

Note: In 2010, GROVE's Dictionary of Music asked me to update my earlier biographical entry for Jim; below is an edited excerpt, which starts ca. 2/3rds of the way through Jim's compositional life.

-Jim began a series of works for piano in 1990, of which pianist Martin Goldray has written: "This music [GAP2,3,4,5 (1993-5)] invites both the performer and the listener to listen carefully, and to delight in musical events in which traditional rhetoric and conventionalisms of piano technique are swept away, and we can find ourselves at the core of musical experience". The GAP series is music 'about' piano music and 'about' piano playing reflecting Jim's lifelong involvement in both. Then, after several decades of composing for acoustic instruments and live performers, he turned to computer-driven midi as "performer-surrogate" facilitating the design of timbrally distinct 'instruments'. About *Intermezzo in Midi* (2000-03) Jim wrote: "midi therein seems to simulate a mechanical simulation of a human doing humanoid music". In turn, midi inspires innovative instrumentation such as: banjo, piano, electric piano, bass viol, contrabassoon in *ars antiqua* #4 (2005).

Jim Randall's music is lucid, eloquent, determinate and enigmatic: not going anywhere in the conventional sense yet always being somewhere even if unnamable. Its eclectic inclusiveness renders labels such as tonal, nontonal, 12-note, or serial inapt. Defiantly non-developmental and non-generic, it is at times mellow (*through Lapland*, 2009), at other times deliberately scruffy (*Special Music for Jack*, 2000-03); a music where timbre, pitch and time merge (*Eakins*, 1972), where both the profound (GAP 6-7, 1999-2004) and the surreal (*Troubadour song* #6, 1980, *Cartoon*, 1978-2001, and *an Overture to Something Else*, 1997) reside. Here and there, anti-Music-Culture Dada-like passages crop up, as if he was (*pretendingtobe*) a "naïve", a self-taught Outsider, as if trying to get back into INTER/PLAY mode, but naïve is surely an incongruous designation insofar as a highly sophisticated *modus operandi* is always evident and operative. A glance at any score, engraved by Nancy Zeltsman or Jim, belies the notion of naiveté: each component of each sound, each note, dynamic, metronome marking, duration, rest, pause, articulation, pedal mark, time signature is precisely notated; rhythmic configurations go in and out of sync; now and then there's an *espressivo* indication such as *gingerly but tenderly* or *brutale* or *strutting tightassed* or *Wide-eyed. Smooth*. Every so often the equivalent of a palimpsest comes to mind, is audible, as if a phrase, a something had been composed, erased, redone, added to, varied, re-inscribed, done. Or as if he'd taken apart what you might think of as Music and reconstituted it from scratch, subversively, idiosyncratically, where nothing is ever *just* anything.

Jim's listening-to-music (a.k.a. 'Incoming Airborne'), reader-aware textworks comprise speculative-literary inquiry (*What Is It about About*, 2003), fairly straight (Princeton Township Committee Meeting, September 28, 1998) and totally unique (*depth of surface/ in Beethoven, op. 22, III*, 1971) talk, punning vaudevillian wordplay (*provoked your majesty*, 1979), ordinary

J K Randall

language polemics ("*it's all yours*", 2000), exceptionally personal analytic critique (*To Astonish the Roses*, *7 e-mails to Walter Branchi*, 2013), *sui generis* layout (*how music goes*, 1976), graphics (*Compose Yourself Part II: Stimulating Speculation No.VI: -----*, 1971-2)) and eccentric punctuation (*a Soundscroll*, 1975).

Meticulously conceived substantive single tones and chords of all types linger on (*GAP2*, *Introfoil* and *Retrofoil*, 1993 and *GAP7* (end), 2006) or just stop (*Sunrise*, 2000-03), their inter/intra-links given ample time to converse amongst themselves and with us. Meditative soliloquies (*Intimacy: a polemic*, 1998 and *GAP8*, 2002) — fabricated from medieval song —, elegance (*an Optional Meditation*, 1997), vigorous keyboard-spanning stretches (*greek nickel #2*, 1979 and *GAP6*, 1999), melodiousness (*Svejk*, 1996 and *shouldn't we talk? II*, 2002), multi-hued harmonic successions (*greek nickel #1*, 1979 and *symphonies*, 2004), ingenious ways of generating line (*Grow*, 2010) and recurrence (*GAP1-7*, esp. *GAP4/1*, 1991-2004) — in time and registral space — (also, how's about 'octave doubling'? as in "...such words as it were vain to close...", 1974-6), simple simplicity (*BOBFEST – Exs D 4&5*, 2013), and over-all expressiveness assemble amid measured silence clad in classical and unusual meters. Mysteries, ambiguities, and unanswered questions — some of which have yet to be formulated — remain. Imbued with a consciousness of all-music, JKR pursues the unknown, eschews fashion, and composes a soundworld of uncommon challenge and articulateness, upending expectation and redefining musical experience.

Randall, J(ames) K(irtland) (*b* Cleveland, OH, 16 June 1929; *d.* Princeton, NJ, 28 May 2014), pp. 35-37, Vol. 7, *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, Second Edition, Edited by Charles Hiroshi Garrett, 2013, reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press.

A recorded performance by Elaine Barkin of her composition *A Soundtext for Jim Randall* (1990) is integral to this issue:

http://the-open-space.org/barkin_jkr/

Half filling a gallery room with green balloons is tiring, but is easy.
Martin Creed did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Sawing up a chair and rebuilding another chair with the pieces obtained is easy.
Bob Lens did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Taking a blank or previously painted canvas, laying it on the floor, and letting people walk on it is easy.
Yoko Ono did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Making a list of everything that should never be found in an exhibition space (pipes, radiators, light switches, electrical networks, etc.) and displaying it in the room is easy.
Jimmie Durham did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Covering the entire surface of a wall with blue carpenters' chalk is easy.
Mel Bochner did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Wrapping a live microphone in paper, scrunching it all up and letting the sound resonate for five minutes is easy.
Takehisa Kosugi did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Dropping a big pile of mud onto an egg on the floor is easy.
Larry Miller did it and now everyone else can do the same.

"The easier it is, the more beautiful it is"

Taking a cardboard box, closing it with packing tape and writing, 'NOTHING' is easy.
Stefan Brüggenmann did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Filling a room with lit blowtorches all pointing in the same direction is easy.
Jannis Kounellis did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Smashing one hundred white porcelain plates is easy.
Shigeki Kitani did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Organizing a cafeteria with tables and stools for one, one, two, three, five, eight, thirteen, twenty-one, or thirty four people, etc. is easy.
Mario Merz did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Taking a blank sheet of paper (4 ft. x 5 ft.), folding it into sixteen, unfolding it and attaching it to the wall is easy.
Franz Erhard Walther did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Leaving a mistake is easy.
André Cadere did it and now everyone else can do the same.

Translator's note: this text was first presented as part of the Université de Rennes/University of Chicago collaboration in the Journal of Artists' Books volume 37 (JAB #37, April 2015). For this iteration, we have altered the layout to allow the repeated second 'phrases' of each statement to stand apart as a form of visual counterpoint, as well as breaking up the originally continuous eight page piece to enable it to function as a contrapuntal leitmotif throughout this issue of Open Space Magazine — Russell Richardson.

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