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Synthetic Exercises

Daniel Muzyczuk

Editorial

How many artists and art practitioners have you met who began in music? Maybe visual art offered them some relief from the rigors of musical scale and tonal structure, a broader material and conceptual palette. But what of those who stayed with musical form and sonic language while also testing its limits? Music's own wildness takes endless forms, from the modern supernatural of recordings and long-range transmissions over air or wire to the synthetic identities promised by the energy injections of new popular sounds. The strange magical or divinatory interests of experimenters and composers have their own occult physics, automations, locutions. In this vein, we are very excited to work with curator Daniel Muzyczuk on the first in a series of issues retracing the weird and winding paths connecting musical and artistic experiments.

— e-flux journal *editors*

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Robert Ashley's libretto for his composition *Yes, But Is It Edible?* opens this issue of *e-flux journal*. In the piece, Ashley explains how experimental music in the 1960s tried, through the use of graphic scores, to fold time into space, and how new music is a radical attempt to oppose divisions between disciplines. As an area where different cultural practices meet, music becomes a liminal space where time can be transformed into spatial relations through its own special alchemy. Ashley's piece is a musical work—a song, even—that is theoretically charged. It is theory performed.

Taking cues from that complex yet highly enjoyable piece, this special issue looks at music as a practice that always involves the outside, but also as a method and process for allowing otherwise unthinkable solutions. Tracing speech patterns was Robert Ashley's most characteristic method of composing, and each contributor in this issue focuses on relationships between music, the spoken word, and poetry as common features of generating text and sound.

Michał Libera presents Ashley's operas as magical practices that bridge mnemotechnics with capital relations. As in *Yes, But Is It Edible?*, these works become theoretical objects: both their structure and their production model offer grounds on which anecdotes can unfold. Here, form and content are integrated.

Speech patterns are also key to prosody (the rhythmic and sonic patterning of poetry), as found in the use of musical measure when poetry is read out loud. Alice Notley speaks to her musical influences and her methods of writing poetry, which involve specific measures and also rely

heavily on the ability to reproduce features of speaking with the dead.

Daniel Muzyczuk continues these threads by approaching dictation as a method for both poetry and music that folds together time and space. Multitudinous examples of words and sounds coming from elsewhere crystallize the notion of clairaudience—the perception of what is inaudible as if by hearing.

Kimberly Alidio is a poet who works with ekphrasis, the literary device of describing art in great detail. Her recent book *Teeter* opens with a series of poems based on experiences of listening to music and poetry. These poems turn into exercises in the elasticity of language. In her essay, Alidio reflects on lyrical practices that are at the root of several languages in the Philippines.

Composer and performer Alessandro Bosetti explores the possibility of remembering music without the aid of words or notation. The writings of Bergson, Borges, and Lucier assist him in this enterprise, which is closely related to Robert Ashley's theoretical practice.

Ben Vida explores his own compositional work alongside the notion of "narrative spectralism," a language-based method of generating music. He focuses on the abstract qualities of language in "concrete poetry," while also reflecting on the musicality of language itself.

Finally, Andrius Arutiunian's "Synthetic Exercises" is a musical composition that emerges from the place where oil extraction, border politics, and auto-tune technologies meet. A specially designed algorithm activates a sound library and directs a wordless composition for synthetic voices. Arutiunian's piece connects many of the concerns shared by this issue's authors and moves them into the realm of relations between AI-generated music and text.

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Daniel Muzyczuk is the chief curator at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Poland. He has curated numerous projects, including " *Through the Soundproof Curtain: The Polish Radio Experimental Studio"* (with Michał Mendyk), ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2019; " *Tobias Zielony: Dark Data"* (with Kathleen Rahn), Marta Herford, 2022; and " *Citizens of the Cosmos: Anton Vidokle with Veronika Hapchenko, Fedir Tetyanych and the Collection of the International Cosmist Institute*," Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 2022. Muzyczuk also served as cocurator of a Konrad Smoleński exhibition for the Polish Pavillion at the 55th Venice Biennale, 2013 (with Agnieszka Pindera). His upcoming book is entitled *Twilight of the Magicians* (Spector Books).

Robert Ashley

Yes, But Is It Edible?

This piece was written for Thomas Buckner.

Notation systems in any language, and particularly in music, refer specifically to a family of instruments or even to a particular instrument.

The more precise, coherent, and descriptive the system, the more specific and limited the relationship between the notation and the instrument becomes.

These simple observations have become so self-evident in the era of computer languages that they hardly bear repeating, except for the didactic purposes of explaining my work in music.

The notation system produces a certain kind of music, the limitations of which are built into the music to be heard, and the notation system will not produce any other kind of music.

There was a lot of experimenting that ended about thirty years ago based on the "hypothesis" that "space" equaled "time" in musical notation. These were experiments, because in the traditional notation of Western music space had never been equated with time except in transcription.

The experiments were designed to determine if musicians could learn to "read" space (on paper) as time. The experiments were not a "failure."

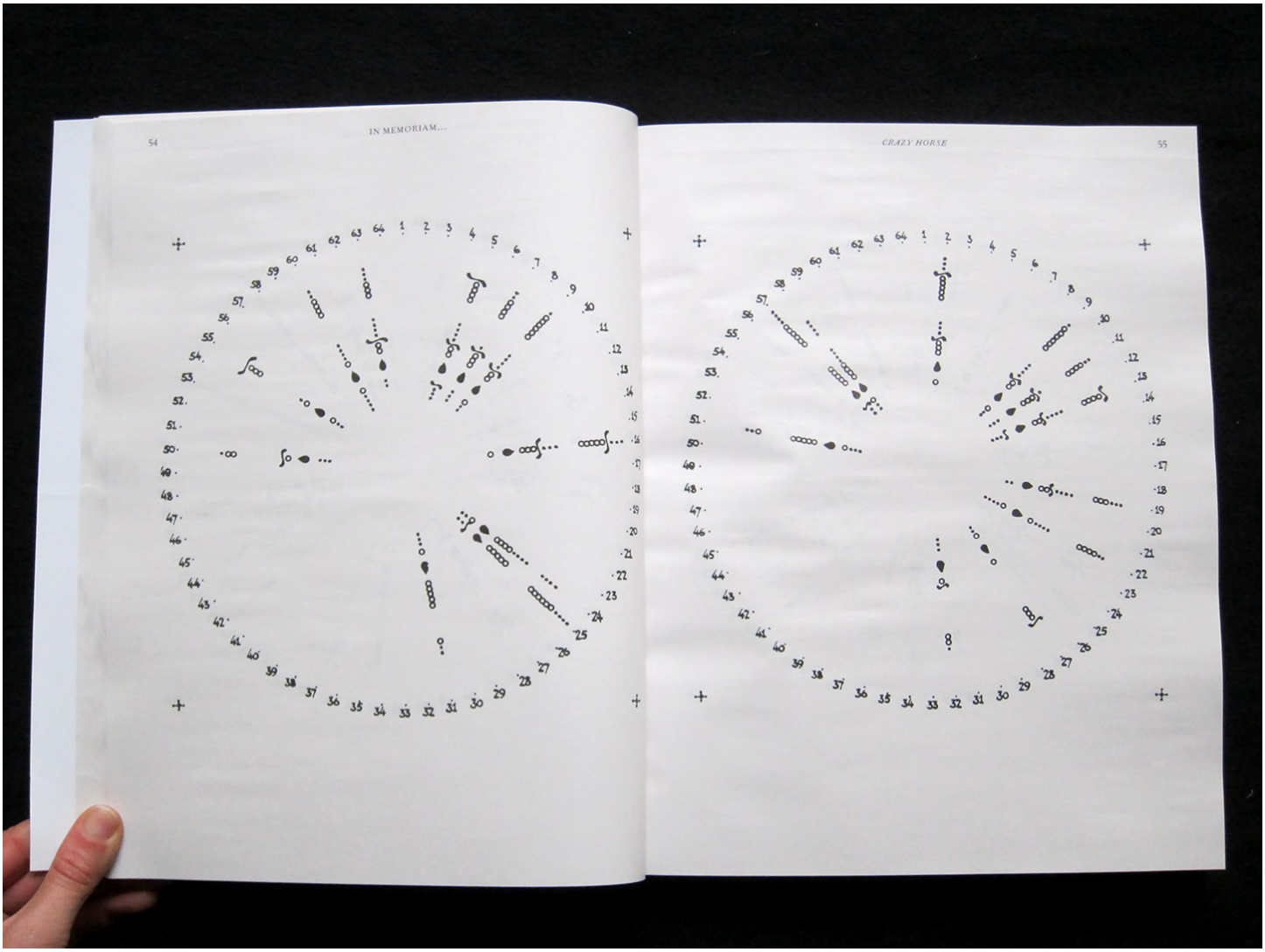
Apart from the simple fact that an experiment cannot "fail"—it may be shown to have been inadequate, mis-designed, or specious, but it cannot "fail"—even in a metaphorical use, such as the use of the term "experimental" to apply to musical notation, the results were spectacularly successful in teaching musicians that what they knew was not all of what could be known.

Western music had reached a state of arrogance that was an embarrassment to everybody. Even to discover that "space" could not be related to "time" in notation was a great achievement spiritually for us all.

What largely got thrown out (or put aside for the time being) was "space" as a notational ingredient.

But what accrued as a result of everybody using the word "space" as a part of a musical idea was, gradually, the realization of the importance of "space" as a simple, physical reality for sound (apart from "time"), which notion had more or less been forgotten for its importance since the eighteenth century, when concert halls were designed to make concert hall music sound like concert hall music.

To a musician, it is surely no coincidence that John Cage proposed that space equals time in notation during the same decade that architects discovered that they couldn't



Two pages from Robert Ashley's score for in memoriam ... Crazy Horse (symphony) (1963), as reproduced in the book Yes, But Is It Edible? (2014).

design concert halls anymore.

So, now we have "space" as a fully distinct concept in music as exploited in the extraordinary works of Alvin Lucier (and many others), and separately we still have "time," which we (still) haven't fully come to grips with.

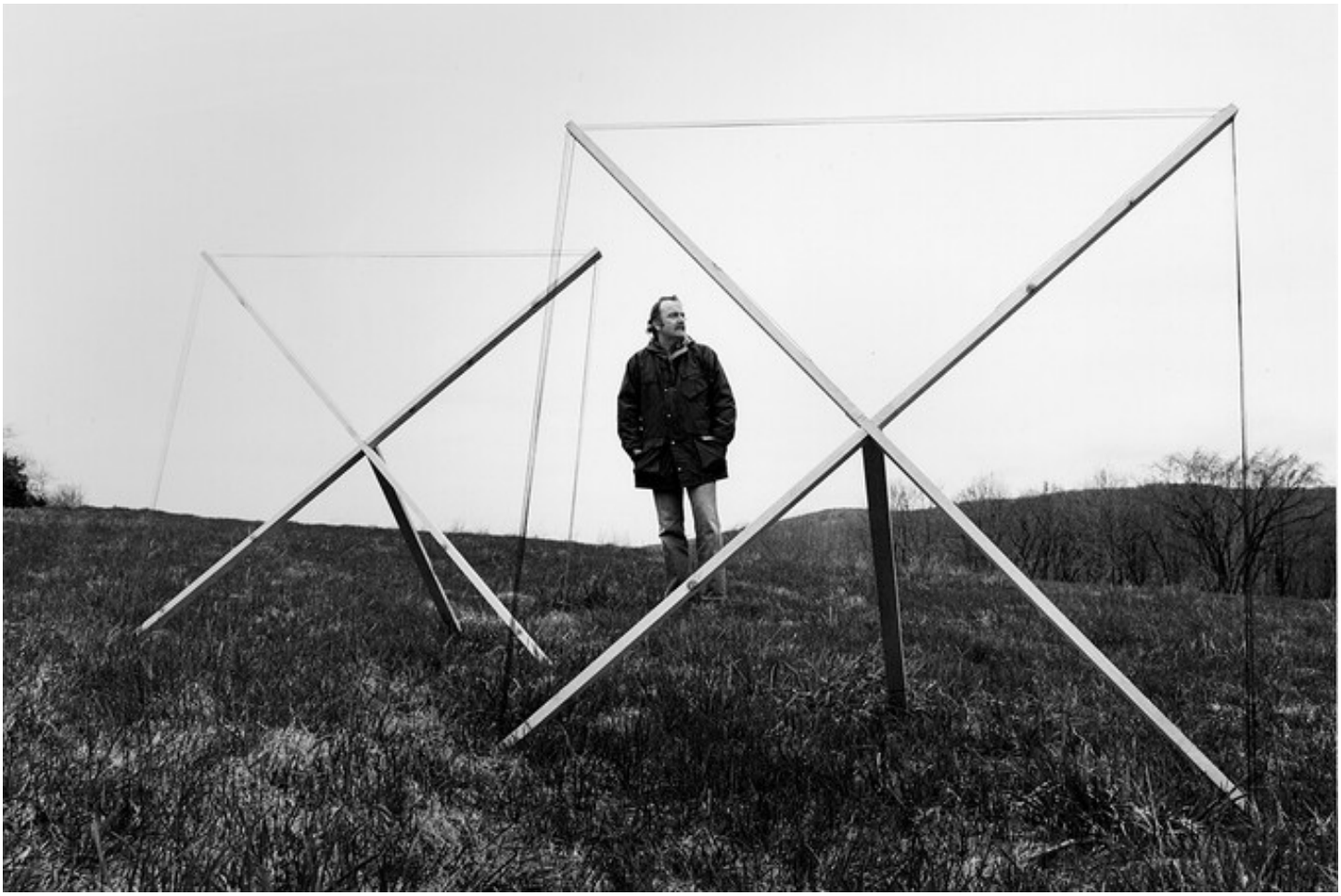
One might observe that as a result of those experiments—a result entirely unforeseen, I think, while the experiments were being carried out—there was a kind of retrenchment. Composers got scared. Indeed, I know that many composers feel that a form of reaction came into music rather suddenly around 1970.

(The so-called "lost" 1960s are, of course, not lost at all. They exist in the file cabinets of composers everywhere in America. What is lost is the musical thrill of the ideas being thrown around and the continuity between those ideas and what is happening now.)

The reaction came as a "return" to traditional notation. When the reaction happened, composers were very divided—divided among themselves as a group, and divided within themselves as individuals—and there was actually a lot of suffering of feelings and political bitterness. One feared that we were on the road of old-fashioned modernism, where one generation violently "replaces" its predecessor. I was personally scared. But in the last thirty years that seems to have healed. I see more diversity now than I could ever have imagined when all the experimenting started. So the experimenting was definitely a success

But we still do not have a notation for what we have as music. We invented a new kind of music in many forms, but we did not get a notation for it.

As regards notation we are about in the situation of the computer linguists who for one reason or another invent languages that cannot be commonly read among



Alvin Lucier performing Sterics (1981). Sound installation and recordings of ionospheric disturbances for large-loop antennas, tape recorder, and playback system, Middletown, Connecticut, late 1980s. Courtesy Alvin Lucier and Tilton Gallery, New York.

computers.

We all know the most distinctive qualities of the music that is important to us now, we know how those qualities differ from what was important before (and may become important again), we know extraordinary things, but we are unable to communicate them in a general way. We cannot generalize about them.

We can offer an enormous number of specific examples: David Behrman, Philip Glass, Alvin Lucier, Gordon Mumma, Pauline Oliveros, Terry Riley, "Blue" Gene Tyranny, Paul DeMarinis, Peter Gordon, Maggi Payne, David Rosenboom, Fast Forward, Tom Hamilton, Sam Ashley, Chris Mann (all friends of mine)—

The names could go to a thousand without getting into differences among the works of any composer, but we cannot generalize this knowledge in a notational system. Thus, we shouldn't look for child prodigies in our time, and equally we are all dizzy about what's going on.

Personally, I think this is wonderful. I have an instinctive sympathy for anarchy at this moment, which I trust to be some form of self-preservation that I should take seriously.

In the meantime, though, I have to compose music. That is, I have to figure out some way of writing things down so that I can have them around long enough for them to "form themselves" into some weird organism that didn't exist before and that gives me a lot of pleasure. That's why I do it.

I am bypassing entirely the question of communicating with another musician and focusing on the question of communicating with myself, so that I can think.

Nothing that I say, then, has anything to do with writing music that other musicians can read (I am totally happy with "teaching" people what my intentions are by making the sounds myself) or with the idea of preserving the music historically (I think I am being honest to say that I am not interested in sounds that I will not be able to hear because I will not be "around"). Or with the idea of contributing a "model" for other composers. And I will try to say, as simply as I can, how I "write" music.

So, this is where it gets boring, because it's just about me.

I write words. Like these. I write notes to myself about how those words are to sound. I write words until there is a story. I write opera. Period.

The problem starts in how to make sounds out of words. My attention shifted strongly about thirty years ago to a barely recognized resolve to get words into music in a way that pleased me.

The musical fact was that I liked all kinds of new music that was just instrumental, but when I heard the use of words in my own work or other work I didn't like it much.

This way of saying it makes the feeling sound more hostile than it was. I am just trying to explain how I discovered this need in myself, why the sudden shift was "strong" and the resolve "barely recognized" at the same time, and why I have not been able since to let go.

I haven't written very many purely instrumental works in the past twenty years. Some instrumental works have been recorded that were intended to be heard in the presence of voices, but were not. (They were composed to be able to stand alone, as a kind of code, but that is hard to explain.)

The technical problem, as every composer knows, is that as a result of electronic amplification the sound of speech has gotten much faster.

That is, we are able to get to the point of a sound/word much quicker than in the past and we are increasingly impatient with the tempo of meaning that was designed to be heard in huge or small acoustical chambers.

The good side is that the sound of speech lends itself to an enormous range of speeds and, even better, almost everybody speaks (as opposed to playing the flute, for instance), so we are definitely deeply into the vernacular.

I am trying to not make a distinction yet between "speech" and "singing."

The practical result is that now, increasingly, we are able to "teach" ourselves and other people to make sounds out of words that are very exciting musically and that we don't have a way of writing down on paper.

I read about thirty years ago in the newspaper that Bell Labs had officially given up on the possibility of speech synthesis. Research was being discontinued for the time being.

Even if this news was a military-intelligence ploy (lie), one's first reaction was: well, it's about time (note that this is spoken sotto voce). Who needs talking machines, when there's so much to be said among humans and there is so little time.

So, let's just think of speech, for the moment, as very fast singing. Or, more generally, very fast music. Let us appreciate the sound of the flute for its natural speed, the sound of the piano for its natural speed, the sound of the synthesizer, etc. And the sound of speech for its natural speed.

And imagine hearing that sound just-as-sound, divorceable from meaning, but more agreeable and thrilling when not divorced from meaning. Forgive for a moment whether that sound can reach the heights of late Beethoven or Bud Powell.

Be generous. Just think of the sound of "speech" in its abundant manifestations and be content that the pleasure of hearing those sounds has been given to you.

Then examine the "speech" carefully with your ears—as though you were a composer of music—and notice the great similarities to every one of the formal aspects of music that we so cherish: its variety of pitch, inflection, dynamic range, information rate, and everything else.

Note, too, that in speech you think in the language of music (e.g., you are conscious of, for instance, "dialect," or how the sounds differ from what you expected). There are so many examples that every choice is a truism.

The kid on the street corner with the box is listening to something that he obviously really appreciates (he dances, smiles, and sings along—every sign of a real and deep musical experience) and you can't understand a word. But the music is nice.

You talk to somebody from another dialect and you can't keep your mind away from the pure musicality. A madman on the street rants to himself and you experience music.

Finally, you start hearing yourself. Like the person who must figure out what he/she looks like in motion in order to become a dancer, you have become a musician.

Sorry, I have really gotten into explaining too much of this idea.

The transformation of attention that I spoke of before can come from any direction, of course. It can occur to humorists, crackpots, very serious composers. It cannot occur to people who have a tin ear.

At the risk of boring even myself and not being able to finish, I have to tell an anecdote in order to give credit where credit is due.

The transformation occurred to me because I found myself for a period of about twelve years in the presence of an amazing group of people who could really talk: the

infamous and now legendary ONCE Group.

It might have happened to me anyway, but historically it didn't. Between the years of 1957 and 1969—the concentrated period—we talked every day and every night in various combinations for many, many hours.

Gordon Mumma, Jackie Mumma, Mary Ashley, Anne Wehrer, George Manupelli, Betty Johnson, Harold Borkin, Milton Cohen, Joseph Wehrer, Cynthia Liddell, Nick Bertoni, "Blue" Gene Tyranny, and a bunch of other people who either had less stamina or just had something better to do.

And I should mention, among the great ones who didn't live nearby but who were cherished as guests, Alvin Lucier and Mary Lucier in particular.

I could hardly exaggerate the obsession with talking and what developed as a virtuosity that everybody in the group became conscious of. I didn't cause it. It just happened in front of my ears and I was there.

Luckily, unlike many bands that break up after the first successful concert (or rehearsal) because everybody in the band thinks that he/she alone got the key and something has to be done about it quick, nobody in this group was particularly interested in exploiting the mutual musical experience, because everybody had something else more important to do.

So, it was pure fun. And, as one result of the pure fun, the ongoing of it became extremely sophisticated.

The ONCE Group could do solos of any length, the most amazing dialogues, and finally, preferably, all at the same time.

Because few of them were affected by music as a profession, there were incredibly few affectations of style. (Joe Wehrer, for a while, tried a kind of stuttering, but everybody made so much fun of that bad idea that he stopped.)

The emphasis was on ensemble sound and, ultimately, on speed. The whole thing sounds sort of sentimental now to think of it, but in truth I have found very few people since (Bill Farley, Sam Ashley, Jacqueline Humbert come to mind) who have thrilled me so much with the sound they make when they talk. It sounds like singing to me. (And, of course, Jackie and Sam sing, too.)

A transitional anecdote is that one day I talked to Anne Wehrer for fourteen hours straight. Mostly she talked and I listened.

I noticed that at around the seventh hour she repeated verbatim a very long idea that she had said hours earlier. This is a transition in that what developed in the ONCE Group technique could easily reproduce what might be called "ranting," but without any of the fear that comes when you suspect that the person you are listening to is out of control.

The legendary ONCE Group learned to make the sound of "ranting" simply as one part of a huge vocabulary of sounds (and a huge repertory of performance pieces).

Eventually, we broke up. I'm not sure what the other people in the group took from that experience (except the joy). But for me as a musician I was permanently changed. I had finally found what music is for me.

I rested for a few years; I really needed it. And then I realized that I was a new man.

And like the new man in the old joke about the man who stopped drinking and became a new man only to discover that the new man wanted a drink, I picked it up right from where they had left it off. I didn't have the ONCE Group anymore, but I had the idea.

Jump ahead in time to what's been going on in the last few years: the "real" operas. With a plot ("such as it is": thank you, Mr. Rockwell, and good day to you, too).

Two hours a year for the last twenty-two years on average (twenty-two?), and I'm just beginning to get the hang of it. I age, but I don't grow up. Too bad.

I got to the technique of these pieces through a fascination with involuntary speech. I mean, specifically, the speech of people who are, for worldly purposes, out of control and doing it only for themselves.

It happens to all of us (I think) some of the time and to some of us all of the time. It is associated with sickness and real suffering, and I don't mean to romanticize those parts of the phenomenon, but musically it can transcend sickness and suffering, and formally it is astounding.

I watched the tendency in myself. I studied. I watched it in other people. I thought about it as music, thanks to what I learned from the ONCE Group. It is the one thing that the ONCE Group did not do, because it is impossible to fake. The ear is so untrickable in certain things.

There is an area in human behavior whose boundaries are clearer than I would have imagined. In this area speech and singing are inextricable.

You exit the area in one direction toward the simple goal of making sense. You exit in the other direction toward making music. In the academic study of music this area is acknowledged, but treated gingerly.

In the mythology of music as a sublime human activity the mysterious "area" is more highly and honestly regarded.

ONCE Group at Robert Rauschenberg's loft. Robert Ashley is bottom center. Photo: Makepeace Tsao.

Its importance is fully understood even if the mapping is not complete.

In involuntary speech the speaker is solely concerned with how effectively what is intended as meaning comes out as sound. This involves not only moving words around in their order, as in literature, but also moving sounds around, as in music.

In its tamest form we rehearse the "tone" of how the conversation is to begin, even as the telephone is ringing. In a more complicated form we rehearse a joke or an anecdote without any scheduled intention of sharing it with another person, as if simply to come to understand it better.

The plot thickens when we start explaining our motives to ourselves with an honesty that can never be shared with another person. In the extreme, we stop hiding this amazing urgency to make sounds. Then the sounds take you away.

A structural analysis of involuntary speech would produce a thick book that with a slight change of jargon could be mistaken for a book on music theory.

To take a simple example, in involuntary speech there are no rules about efficiency, no rules about wasting other people's time in repeating yourself. Repeating yourself is of the essence of the activity: to do it (often enough) until the effect has been accomplished. As in music.

Another part of involuntary speech, very important, is that the action and its motives are simultaneous. It is entirely unpremeditated. It cannot be rehearsed. It is without caution or discretion.

In involuntary speech we can all experience one of the deepest mysteries of music (and of great athletic achievements, coincidentally): the action that can be accomplished only at full speed, the action that is prepared in trying and trying again, but never realized except in execution, the action that can be understood only in retrospect, because total involvement of being is required and there is nothing left of us to stand aside and observe.

We are at one with ourselves. We are heedless.

To get back to the question of notation: "improvisation" is a without-which in composing music in a traditional style.

(Try at the piano to get something down that is in your head; try again; try again; make a few notes; try again; keep adding things, most of the time hoping for the best, but without knowing in which direction the best is to be found; try again; recognize some "form" emerging; make a few mental notes about the "form"; try again; keep adding things, etc.

This is not, technically, "improvisation," but there is no other word for it. In fact, it is exactly the activity of involuntary speech.

Go into your studio. Lock the door [COMPOSER AT WORK]. Sit down at the piano, blank paper on the stand. Same process. Same pain. Get something nice to listen to. Poof! you're a composer. (Lenny Bruce)

Try this on the street with words. Notice how the traffic avoids you. Keep an eye peeled for the police. No wonder there should be no musicians or poets in the ideal republic.

Difference is: those pencil marks on the paper are your excuse. Problem is: those pencil marks on the paper are musical notes, and sometimes musical notes just won't do.)

(Another kind of composing is to make a plan and stick to it. Stick to it is the important part. I mean a plan that instructs the performers, but doesn't control the piece, doesn't control what the listener will hear.

Some composers are very fond of this approach, because the plan can seem so beautiful. I have tried this a few times myself, but my imagination gets away from me.

I have performers out in the desert, miles apart, with dozens of automobile horns each and some sort of keyboard that can handle the high amperage of the car horns, each performer making up patterns that are a kind of message to the other players, miles away, and who can barely hear the signal, and who are making messages themselves.

This is a violation of the environment. My imagination gets away from me. Miles and miles of desert are violated by the sound of hundreds of car horns, miles and miles apart. Very beautiful to the listener. Probably hard on the lizards and insects and birds and mammals, who were, presumably, happy before the music started.

But, it is a *plan*, and were I of that persuasion now, I would stick to it. This kind of composing has a name, but I have forgotten what the name is, because it doesn't lend itself to telling a story. Sorry, I got off the track.)

Scene Two: Go into your studio. Lock the door [COMPOSER AT WORK]. Slump around the studio muttering things to yourself. Make yourself a drink. Make yourself another drink. Let the words come out. Let the story come out. Let the sounds come out. Who's running this show, anyway?

Finally, something begins to emerge. ("Make sense" is a different idea at the moment.) Make a few mental notes about the "form"; try again; keep adding things, etc. It is the activity of involuntary speech. It is the activity of composing, as we know it.

Same as in social speaking. You are talking to someone "about" something. You open your mouth and something comes out. You are as surprised at the meaning as is the other person.

If the meaning is not what you hoped for (what would convince, what would make you sound intelligent, what would make you sound interesting socially), you revise immediately. "I mean ..." Try again.

Among the great speakers (lawyers in front of a jury, preachers in front of a congregation), success is called "genius." Some have it, some don't.

Of course, there are guidelines: what you are talking "about." Away from "about" just won't do. Statement: "The role of the United States government in support of the arts is pathetic and primitive."

Response: "The ermine is a very dirty animal. In itself it is a precious bedsheet, but it has no change of linen, it does its laundry with its tongue." That just won't do.

The surrealists were onto something.

Finally, then, (same process, same pain) there is the "text" (or libretto for the opera). It is a "song." It has many voices or "characters." The room is filled with people, all singing beautifully. You are, technically, insane. But that's okay. The door is locked [COMPOSER AT WORK]. Now what?

The pitch range is typically an octave. (Who knows why?) The rhythm is beyond the capacities of notation (actually, it is not), but if you take the pains to try, two things happen:

(1) You distort the rhythm in trying to make it fit; you distort it because the conventions of rhythmic notation make you think it is what it is not. You want to make it readable. Strong habits, thinking, talking, eating, drinking, smoking, are not to be changed without extensive rehabilitation, which at the moment you don't have time for. And who would help? Where would you turn? The Clinic for Composers.

(2) You revert to the iron rule of intelligibility. You exit the mysterious area wherein speech and singing are inextricable in the wrong direction. You have given up on music in favor of speech. You should go into politics where the speech is written, rewritten, agreed upon, memorized, read from the teleprompter.

The pitch range and pitch speed are a problem, solvable (above) in electronics, but not solvable in the habits of the listener.

We are used to imitations of the pitch change of speech at a very slowed-down rate. Starting with Monteverdi (they say), the Europeans began imitating the pitch change of speech at a slowed-down rate, because the pitch change of speech was so beautiful. And because, otherwise, it could not or would not be heard.

(Note that here we have a sociological problem: the rich and the poor, etc.) (Note, too, that British Music Hall pitch change never slowed down, and the British still like it.) (Note, too, that, musicology to the contrary, Monteverdi is always played at half-speed.)

Historically, then, the musical potential of half-speed became a big deal. Put aside intelligibility, put aside urgency of plot. Put in embellishment. Put in Maria Callas and Patsy Cline and Billie Holiday. (They must have listened to each other's records with admiration.) Put in Elvis and Lennon.

But it doesn't work for me. I love all of the above (maybe more than you do), but the ideas are not discursive. The ideas are symbolical. ("She's got a ticket to ride." The whole song.) And there is only one character. So, you can't enact a story. It can be *told* (Dylan), if the listener has the patience, but there are no characters on stage.

(It is a wonderful form, actually. The characters blossom in your imagination, but there are too few of them to satisfy one's imagination of the moment when one's life is changed.)

So, pop music is not opera. It's too short and the characters are too few.

Put aside the Irish and Jewish newcomer's Broadway musical parody of America. Really intelligible. Straight-ahead parody of the American dream. Comedy. Lloyd Weber. It will be around forever. I don't like the howling. I don't like the vibrato. I prefer the old *Saturday Night Live*.

Harmony doesn't matter, except for where you come from. Forty-one tones to the octave: great. One tone to the octave: great. Just intonation: great. Unjust intonation: great. Chinese opera: you have to be Chinese.

First time you hear a mariachi band, you think they are playing out of tune. You hear twenty mariachi bands (one of my records), they are all out of tune in exactly the same way. Mexicans must hear it differently. Maybe it's me.

Country music: impossible to imitate. Try it for yourself. (Not in public, please.) European conductor won't conduct American orchestras: they don't play in tune. Harmony: it comes from the music. It comes from people making music together. When it's right, it's right. Everybody knows.

It can't be said in words. Forget the books. They lie. Well intentioned, but provincial. From a time before we all knew each other and how different we can be.

Keep the speed of speech, because it is so beautiful. Keep the pitch range of speech. (It can be exaggerated, if you can do it without sounding like a British Music Hall. Let the microphone take care of the details.) Keep the urgency of the storytelling. Then, you have become a character. You could be in an opera. Like me.

X

This text was written in 1999 and first performed by Robert Ashley at the University of California San Diego in April 2000.

A distinguished figure in American contemporary music, **Robert Ashley** (1930–2014) holds an international reputation for his work in new forms of opera and multidisciplinary projects. His recorded works are acknowledged classics of language in a musical setting.

> We have magic as entertainment or ritual or perhaps historically as religion. But the magic we know is largely visual with heavy psychological overtones. Our music, in the most extreme interpretation of its complexity, has no purposeful illusionary quality. We expect to recognize what we hear … In the case of the *Illusion Models* sound will be organized with the sole purpose of creating illusions … In any size space, the Sensors, permanently installed and flawless in their workings, know where the sole auditor is. The information the Sensors are programmed to describe to the sound producing Mechanism tells where the sole auditor is, even if the auditor moves. The sound producing Mechanism makes the auditor think that the physical boundaries of the space in every direction are very far away.
>
> —Robert Ashley[1]

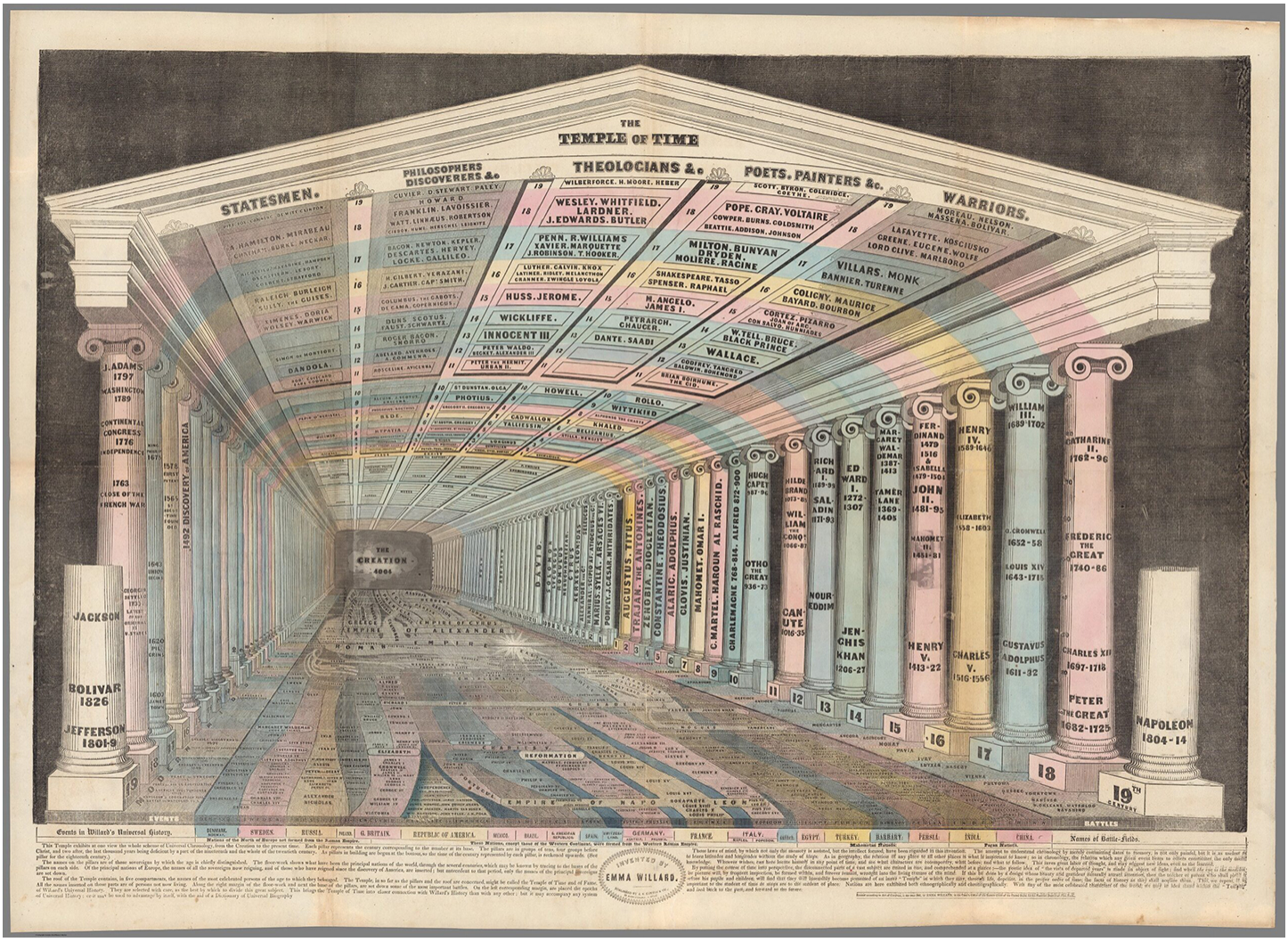
Michał Libera

Throat on Brain: Magic and the Art of Memory in Robert Ashley's Operas

This note is possibly the most explicit link the composer Robert Ashley ever made between his own work and the work of magic.[2] To my knowledge, he never witnessed any of his four *Illusion Models* (1970) works being performed successfully (perhaps a necessary post-factum add-on joke to his understanding of magic) and in the following years he gradually moved away from technologically driven prestidigitation. In parallel, however, he was developing a different kind of magic that eventually blossomed in his operas, which I discuss here.[3] The path to this different kind of magic was paved by his interest in the art of memory, and in particular its hermetic manifestation as worked out by the philosopher Giordano Bruno in the sixteenth century.

The term "art of memory" does not denote a single philosophical doctrine, but rather refers to various systematic attempts at improving memory that begin at least as early as Simonides and continue today perhaps in contemporary schools of "fast learning." Arguably, there is nothing more to the art of memory than historically evolving sets of mnemotechnics. Yet their praxeological orientation is never devoid of subtexts. It is these subtexts, very often of a magical nature, that were of major, continuing interest for Ashley throughout his work on his interrelated operas, and not merely because of the need to coordinate thousands of minutes of music and dozens of thousands of words. In other words, given the overwhelming amount of information in Ashley's operas, he might have been interested in the art of memory as a systemizing tool—though the latter does not in the least exhaust the relevance of the art of memory to Ashley's operas.

Frances Yates, a key scholar in the history of the art of memory, writes that "artificial memory is established from places and images, the stock definition to be forever



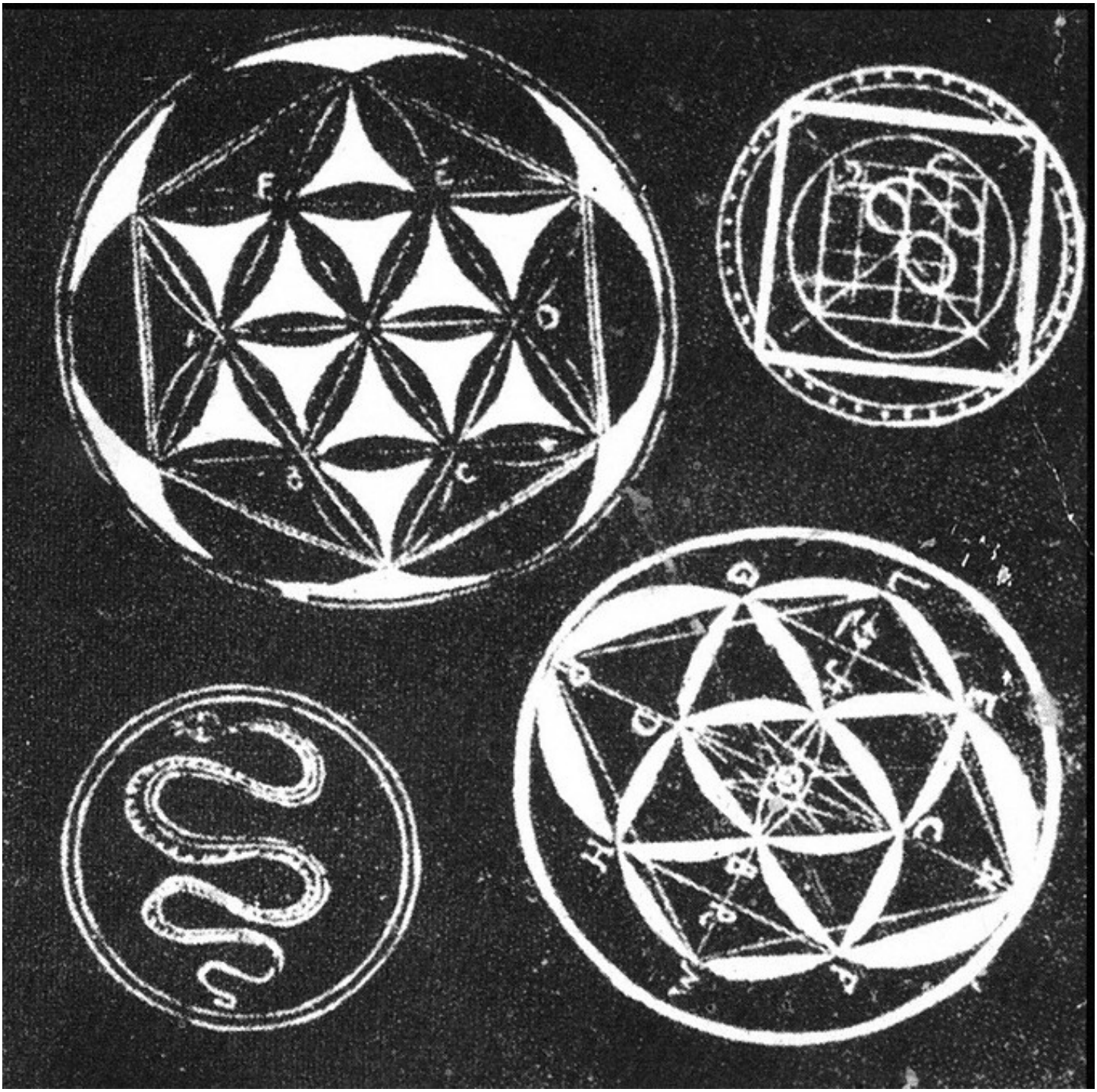
Emma Willard, The Temple of Time, 1846. Source: Cartography Associates. License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0.

repeated down the ages."[4] However, over the centuries, the meaning of terminology changes and thus, as Yates knows as clearly as anyone, the corresponding philosophical details do as well. Sometimes "images" are called "objects ," "bodies," " *adiectis*," or "forms," while "places" become "loci" or " *subiectis*" and so on. Still, following Yates, the logic remains the same:

> A *locus* is a place easily grasped by the memory, such as a house, an intercolumnar space, a corner, an arch, or the like. Images are forms, marks or simulacra (*formae, notae, simulacra*) of what we wish to remember. For instance if we wish to recall the genus of a horse, of a lion, of an eagle, we must place their images on definite *loci*.[5]

Ashley adds one more chapter in the historical repetition of this exploration. In fact, his well-known description of opera—"When you put characters in a landscape, that's an opera"[6]—is so strikingly similar to Yates's descriptions, it's as if he were saying that his operas *are* themselves examples of an art of memory.

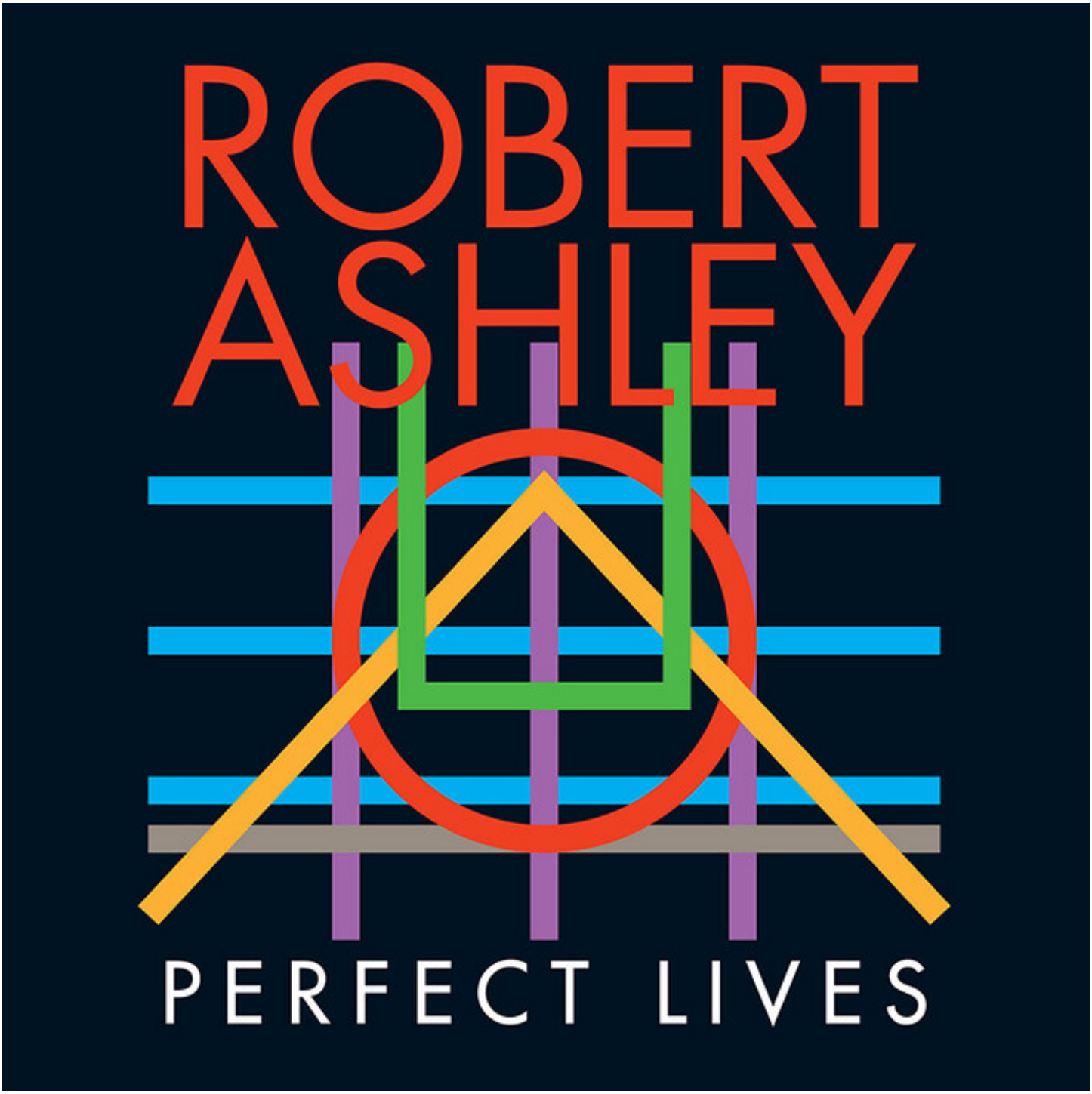
Like any other author of the art of memory, Ashley brings his own jargon and semantics. The key word used here is neither "loci" nor "place"; it is "landscape." And everything that comes with it seems important: the air, the space, the closeness, the continuity of this background of social life, the scale of it, the planetary aspect, the combination of natural and social shaping, the being-of-the-world that it exhibits. (In other words, it is in the world, in the "landscape," where magic begins.) Because of all this, "landscape" is perfectly in line with Yates's functional requirement for an art of memory: like "loci" or " *subiecti*," a landscape must be "easily grasped by memory." Just a few of the settings in Ashley's operas include: the park, the supermarket, the bank, the bar, the living room, the church, the backyard, condos for sale, lowrider car dealerships, airline ticket counters, the rolling plains of the



Woodcut from Articuli centum et sexaginta adversus huius tempestatis mathematicos atque philosophos (One hundred and sixty theses against mathematicians and philosophers) by Giordano Bruno, Prague, 1588.

US Corn Belt, a roadside turnoff somewhere in the southwest, "Most High Desert Reaches."[7] There can be no mistake: Ashely's landscapes are sites in a specifically American art of memory, one founded on large spaces and movement, if not expansion. The metaphors here rarely consist of ethnographic details, but are rather geographical: coordinates, vectors, cardinal directions, lengths and widths and heights, proportions, astrology, distances of extreme variety. "That's where you are, seven paces from the toilet / under the golden sky."[8]

Whatever one puts in the foreground against such a "landscape," it remains by default part of a larger picture. Even if minor, it is hardly accidental. Quite to the contrary, it is structural; it is always in relation to something else and this relation makes it bigger than it really is. What Ashley



The album cover of Robert Ashley's Perfect Lives shows overlapping visual matrices, each of which represents a different act in the opera.

brings into the "landscape" he calls "characters." Not "images," not "forms," not "objects," but "characters." Again, a meaningful shift of meaning. Have a look at the characters from Ashely's opera *Perfect Lives*: Raoul de Noget, "a singer who's seen better days";[9] his friend Buddy, the "World's Greatest Piano Player"; D, "also known as 'The Captain of the Football Team'"; bartender Rodney, "skeptical about boogie woogie" but "philosophical about his wife"; Baby, "manager in the bank," where also Jennifer, Kate, Eleanor, Linda, and Susie work—"that's [their] job, mostly [they] help people count their money, [they] like it."[10] And many more. (One more prefiguration: magic goes with the mundane.) Viewed in the context of the art of memory, these characters seem to aspire to something like an American pantheon. It is this exposition that brings to mind Giordano Bruno's figures on

wheels of memory: Neptune, Apollo, or other gods. But while the latter are usually presented with their own attributes (trident, arrow) and animals (horse, python), their American equivalents are embedded in local social relations. And unlike Neptune and Apollo, who never swap their attributes, Ashley characters move around. They circulate in a social milieu, they change landscapes, like everybody does today, they escape, come back, move forward, and to the side.

If Yates is right about the persistent recurrence of the same basic structure of (foreground) objects set against (background) places in all arts of memory, then what makes them different (and thus makes their magic different) is the movement between objects and places, forms and loci, "characters" and "landscapes." In Cicero and Simonides, movement was hardly there at all. Since their techniques were focused on distributing different objects in various places in a single room, the basic movement was the movement of the eye, maybe the turning of the neck or lifting of the head, at most a walk towards a hidden corner. Bruno, on the other hand, sought to enhance memory using his famous wheels: computational devices containing visual representations of ideas (put into categories) that open the possibility of various connections between them and thus lines of memory. We know little of the way Bruno performed his own magic, except that it was effective (he was offered positions in high courts) and computational. And that the movement was no longer under human control but was an arithmetic of planetary mnemonic powers. This is external memory governed by itself.

Ashley often introduces his characters as Cicero would, except that Roman chambers are replaced by American living rooms centered around fireplaces: "Now, seated at evening, she faces due east, / i.e., placed in space and still aflux in time. / He, on the other hand (that is, her right), / faces pure north, i.e., set in time and / totally adrift in space, huddled at the lamp."[11] We, the auditors, listen, and our ears, step by step, fix the details of the image. There are other ways too that Ashley appeals to memory, much more like Brunonian spinning wheels:

> We are on the inside / looking out moving left it takes all day … looking for something interesting / now turn left still on the inside still / looking for something interesting / now turn left the fence is still there keep looking / keep looking for something interesting / now turn left again / still looking still / looking we are looking for food.[12]

But these mnemonic patterns are overgrown with new ones that reflect the times in which we live today when "more and more … 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."[13]

Movements of industrial origins are also integral parts of Ashley's "landscapes." In them, voices move around the world in an instant, microwaves heat dinners, bullets break off people's legs as well as celebrate national holidays, airplanes (even the old type) send us calls from heaven while flying saucers arrive from the future and the cars are everywhere and can do everything, even bring together Three Great Families of the High Desert Region. Yes, all these crazy movements are integral to the content of Ashley's plots; they are also crucial to how he designs his art of memory called opera, how he makes us hear the plots. (Note: that's where the magic slowly creeps in.) His art, his techniques are part of the industrial history he pictures.

As an example, take the third act of *Perfect Lives*, subtitled "The Bank." We are following a car, "the car that's full of holes," heading to Indiana. Gwyn is in the car and she "turns on the auto radio to get a song. Click. / *I love-d you like an old time melody / … / I love'd you like a dot dot dot symphony / … / Music bringing back a memory becomes time / stops another treasury I say*."[14] Click. Or rather "click" since we, the listeners, actually do the act of "clicking" in our heads. Listening to the opera, we only hear the word "click." This interplay of clicks (the word and the action) is symptomatic. The moment when Gwyn turns on the radio is introduced by the narrator in a twofold way. First, the fact that the click might be on its way in the plot is announced by the narrating voice that says "turns on the auto radio to get a song." Then, the moment of turning on the radio, the moment when the click should be heard, is marked or perhaps replaced by the very same voice delivering an onomatopoeic word, and by—with a slight delay—a monochrome gray screen in the video portion of the piece. "Click" thus tells the story while also enacting it. Then, finally, there is a moment of the click in the soundtrack, the click is inaudible, this is the moment when the music changes and hence the "landscape" as well: a jump or shift from a car setting into a song.

This might sound like a trivial development. It is montage. The cut. We—those of us living in the twenty-first century—obviously understand montage quite well, especially if it is performed so clearly and indicated so meticulously like it is here. Montage became a cognitive technique and is one more element of our everyday mnemotechnics. However, there is another element of Ashley's art of memory that sheds a new light on montage. As he says:

> I'm fascinated by the speed in format radio. The announcers speak at an unbelievable tempo. But they make it sound so casual that you think that they're talking at an ordinary pace. You think that they're sounding like you. Actually, they're talking twice as

> fast as I am. I've never heard people talk faster than this, and I know people who really talk fast. Within 12 seconds they give you the news, the weather, everything, plus two or three ads. It's totally incredible.[15]

The shift of "landscapes" in "The Bank" is a transition from a "car that's full of holes" into a song, and can be understood in terms of multiple speeds. There is the speed of voice, pretty much unchanging the whole time. There is the speed of the announcement, the phrase. There is the speed of the onomatopoeia and the slightly delayed speed of the gray image mentioned above. There is also the speed of the click in the soundtrack: this is the click that is omitted, removed, or replaced by the word. Or perhaps, and this is my contention, it is not omitted or removed but rather accelerated. It is so fast that we cannot be on time. We are either too early (announcement), or not sure (onomatopoeia), or too late (already in a new "landscape"). Here, "real fast" means that it did happen, and we know it, and it did happen on the plane of our hearing. But we did not hear the thing. "Real fast" means imperceptible: the click is so fast that it becomes a cut, like in a montage.

way meaning is changed at different speeds. These are mental speeds of our hearing equivalent to airplanes and gunshots. Even faster than these. And then there is the speed of speech. There are times in his operas when the text is delivered in a crazy tempo; there are also times when the same text is delivered in different tempos at the same time; there are different overlaps of time, including the ones when the future precedes the present; there are times when the amount of information seems to change the tempo. And then there is the click becoming the cut in the third part of *Perfect Lives*. The click is right on the other side; it is just slightly faster than we are and hence it is (for now) physically impossible to hear (for us). (Final thesis: this impossibility of hearing something too fast is an effective element of Ashley's operas, his audio art of memory and magic.)

Consider what happens in the middle of "The Park" in *Perfect Lives*. After ten minutes of Ashley's slow, mantra-like delivery, a shift occurs from a third-person narration ("he sat on the bed, both feet on the floor") to a first-person narration ("I am sitting on a bench next to myself"). The voice delivery remains the same. The rhythm and the pace of it remain the same. The background music too, it is untouched by the shift. Gradually, by following the props of the imagined scenes, we start to understand that

Film still from Perfect Lives, directed by John Sanborn, 1984.

This is the industrial heart of Ashley's art of memory: the

the change in "landscape" must have occurred somewhere there, too. Possibly also a change of "characters"? Only a few lines later, or a dozen seconds into the future, we also learn that "I am not sitting on a bench next to myself." And soon after that "I imagine there are two men on the bench / The exchange between them will not be seen."[16] It is a bit like "The Bank"; the difference is that in "The Park," it is unannounced.

Can this be a very simple example of the emergence of a new kind of "character" in Ashley's opera, i.e., the voice itself? At some point the voice says, "I am completely knowable in every way" and then also "the anger of the words makes me in the dream of myself." It is not a lyrical subject. It is a "character" that is free enough to shift from embodying other characters of the story to not embodying them and then embodying itself and then not embodying the narrator, whether announced and accentuated or unannounced and unaccentuated. It is grammar acting in speech (but not simply organizing it). Perhaps this ability makes voices "characters" in the "landscape" of music and at the same it makes them "landscapes" for shifting "characters." Is this not what Ashley meant when he said that his characters are always real (and that real characters can pretend they are not real)?[17] What is more real, more "characteristic" in his operas than his own voice (not himself), the voice of Joan La Barbara (not Joan La Barbara herself), the voice of Thomas Buckner (not Thomas Buckner himself)?

And then sometimes, in the warmth of these voices, in their sensual directness, in their straightforward identity—real, bodily—they suddenly perform a cold cut, an unannounced, unmarked shift in characters, which hide behind the voices, a shift that we are always late to perceive, a change we can only grasp in retrospect, after the deed is done, we can only get to it by the work of memory.

The first of three sections titled "Anecdote with Admonition and Song" that we find in Ashley's opera *Atalanta (Acts of God)* is about a brain and a throat. "In that most precious part of us, the brain, we are all connected. You heard me. We are all connected. We are connected, each one of us to all of us." The connections the brain makes are all extremely fast. We are unable to make those connections objects of our perception. They are also inaudible, or faintly audible. But "right beneath the brain there is a thing we call a throat." The throat vibrates and most of the vibrations, on the other hand, are perfectly audible and easily recognizable. We can also control them. We can make them louder or quieter, higher or lower, or rather, faster or slower. This is called speaking, or singing, and it has an important organic function: "To protect those [brain] connections … 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."[18] We are in the midst of contemporary hermeticism here, and it is a system of speeds.

The brain is the first axis of Ashley's art of memory (and perhaps its main "landscape" since it is freed from figurative bonds). This is the axis of the inaudible, the imperceptible. It is faster than the vibrations of the throat. This is modernity. It brings speed. Or rather an extreme variety of speeds. And, if we believe Ashley, the brain is unity, the coordination between the mind and the body through which we become whole. (By the way, is this not the reason why "the exchange between [the two men on the bench] will not be seen"?). Again, the unity cannot be but imperceptible. At least at this point in time, we are unable to experience it. Probably we will be able to experience it in the future. But for now, we can only learn about it. This is big science. And we have technology. But we cannot touch it, not really. We cannot hear it. Yet we have to protect it. No wonder we have problems with concentration, with memory.

The throat is the second axis (and perhaps all Ashley's "characters" are crammed in here). This is the axis of what we hear. Here come the senses. Vibrations. Even the fastest of senses is incomparable to the speed of the brain. This is the realm of composition. Playing with sounds, overlapping different tempos, juxtaposing extreme speeds, delaying, repeating, variating, accumulating information, diluting it, omitting it (very important), and doing all this with the text too, with grammar; without it, without the text, shifting would be very difficult to recognize, and too arbitrary. It is actually the text, the semantics of it as well as the sound of it, but most of all the grammar of it, that makes it possible to sometimes hear through the audible material, to grasp the underlying speeds, the speeds that are too fast to be composable, the speeds that need to be protected, they can only be modulated.

> And, we have learned that we can, whoa, modulate those [brain] connections by differing the sounds the throat makes … And, the parts of the modulation, without a better word than "parts," are what we call "words." In other words, the words are ours only, or ours alone. And, that's why we have to keep on talking.[19]

This is where the magic is. When the throat and the brain intersect. They rarely do, unless magic is involved. It is like a fifth "Illusion Model," one for memory ("We expect to recognize what we hear," remember?). It is like déjà vu—nothing but a difference of speeds of information circling in the brain. It is the rhythm of it, it is the time that opens in the delay of this circling back to itself. This is the way memory works on the edge of memory, when it is not perceived as memory. This is where the magic is, in no magical place. It is where it has always been, right over the edge of our historically determined cognitive skills, just beyond what we are able to grasp. Only very rarely are we able to have access to something beyond our senses in

Robert Ashley, Atalanta, performed at Festival d'Automne in Paris.

our senses, to hear more than we hear. This is what happens in Ashley operas from time to time. Not often. But if improving memory means anything today, this is it; if there is any future to memory, it is this. The rest can be handled by computers.

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Michał Libera is a sociologist working in the sound and music field since 2003, recently involved mostly in producing and staging sound essays and other experimental forms of radio art and opera, which brought him to collaborate with Martin Küchen, Pete Simonelli, Ralf Meinz, Komuna// Warszawa, Hilary Jeffery, Apartment House, and others. Libera produces the conceptual pop label Populista, dedicated to mis- and over-interpretation of music, as well as a series of reinterpretations of music made at the Polish Radio Experimental Studio (Bôłt Records). He has curated various concerts, festivals and anti-festivals, and music programs for exhibitons, and is a member of the art group called Grupa Budapeszt.

1
Ashley, *Outside of Time: Ideas about Music* (Musik Texte, 2009), 320.

2
The text is a development and a reworking of one of the arguments presented in my lengthy analysis of Robert Ashley's operas commissioned by Antoni Michnik and published in *Glissando* , no. 44 (2023).

3
Over the course of his career Ashley composed many operas. A complete list can be found on his website http://www.robertashley.org/ .

4
Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Routledge, 1966), 6.

5
Art of Memory , 6.

6
Interview by Thomas B. Holmes, *Recordings of Experimental Music* 4, no. 2 (1982).

7
Ashley, *Perfect Lives: An Opera* (Archer Fields, 1991).

8
From the libretto for Ashely's *Improvement (Don Leaves Linda*) (1985) http://www.robertashley.org/librettos/Improvement%20(Don%20Leaves%20Linda)%20Libretto.pdf .

9
This is Kyle Gann's phrase. See Gann, *Robert Ashley* (University of Illinois Press, 2012), 61.

10
Ashley, *Perfect Lives*, 37.

11
Perfect Lives , 90.

12
Perfect Lives , 21.

13
Ashley, *Atalanta (Acts of God)* (Burning Books, 2011), 22.

14
Perfect Lives , 39.

15
Quoted in Thom Holmes, "Robert Ashely: Built for Speed," *The Wire*, March 2014 https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/interviews/robert-ashley_built-for-speed .

16
Perfect Lives , 11–12.

17
Outside of Time , 156.

18
Atalanta , 22–26.

19
Atalanta , 22–26.

Alice Notley in conversation with Daniel Muzyczuk

a voice in my brain rolled up on skeins in cells

Alice Notley is an American poet and essayist living in Paris whose work primarily consists of long-form epic poems. She seeks ways in which a female author can use this form removed from its ancient source—tales of men fighting against men. There is another important aspect of Notley's method: she channels the voices of the dead. For her 1995 work *Close to Me and Closer … (The Language of Heaven)*, for example, she wrote down a conversation with her deceased father. Reflecting on this experience, she noted the importance of tone, measure, and rhythm in the utterances she received:

> I remember feeling very happy writing it, waking up in the mornings with my dead father's voice in my head. In order to write his speeches properly I had to have faith that that was his literal voice I heard. I let the voice dictate to me exactly what to write with very little interference from my "rationalizing" self … In life he had a tenor voice and often spoke intensely and opinionatedly, reaching after words and making a lot of stresses, occasionally strange ones.[1]

Notley's works usually engage different tools that help the reader in reproducing measure connected with speech patterns. Last year she published *Telling the Truth as It Comes Up: Selected Talks & Essays 1991–2018*, and one of her longest poems to date, *The Speak Angel Series*. Both feature many references to music and sound as well as thoughts on their relationship to poetry. I met Notley in Paris to discuss her views on these matters. Our interview concludes with a brief excerpt from her forthcoming book, *Being Reflected Upon*.

—DM

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Daniel Muzyczuk: Reading your work has an almost musical sensation. You use methods that allow you to influence the pace and rhythm of reading. In *The Descent of Alette,* for example, you use quotation marks to introduce measure. They thus become a score or structure that wants to become another structure, to quote Pier Paolo Pasolini. The poem wants the performer to submit to a very specific kind of rhythm. But you also assign another role to quotation marks, writing that they "may remind the reader that each phrase is a thing said by a voice: it is not a thought, or a record of thought, this is a story, told."[2]

Alice Notley: I made a measure. That's a very traditional thing for a poet to do which enables somebody to learn the poem easily and to keep it organized. It's an organizational principle, and it also gives pleasure.

DM: A section of *The Speak Angel Series* entitled

Douglas Oliver, diagram of stresses in Black Mountain Blues by Bessie Smith, from Douglas Oliver, Poetry and Narrative in Performance (Macmillan Press, 1989).

"Opera" follows that method and additionally introduces a chanting quality through capital letters, which indicate stresses.

AN: It was accidental. I wrote the whole first section, which is very narrative and has a plot. That section was done, and I realized I was still inside the world where the people that had been led by me to this place could remake the cosmos. I wrote a new section and started hearing this music, which in fact was the stresses. They were counter to normal stresses. I put them in capital letters. I started reading them aloud and they hurt my throat. But I kept doing it. I wasn't reading from it in readings because I didn't know what to do about the fact that it hurt my throat. And I also didn't really understand what I was doing. And then one day I was reading them, and I automatically sang it, and it stopped hurting my throat. It made me find a place in my throat to make it work. That is the place that you sing from or chant from.

AUDIO

DM: You had early training for such intoning with the Native American chants you learned in childhood.

AN: My parents each taught me one. They told me the correct melodies and I know that I changed them. Later in life I heard my mother sing the one she'd taught me. She sang it to me before she died, and it sounded completely different from the way I remembered it. They were from Arizona. I grew up in the Southwest in a town where there was a tribe. My father grew up in Prescott where they had an organization of businessmen who would put on Native American dances. In the beginning, these non-Indigenous businessmen had tried to get the tribes to come and do the dances, and the tribes said no. But they offered to teach them the dances. My father was involved in the Hopi Snake Dance, which involves a live snake in your mouth. And he did this for several years. He also did something called the Apache Dog Dance. When my mother was pregnant with me, she danced the Hopi Corn Maidens Dance, and it had a full chant. When I was five, she passed it on to me.

DM: In your latest book of essays, *Telling the Truth as It Comes Up: Selected Talks & Essays 1991–2018*, there's a piece about musical influences on poetry. It starts with a statement that in the twentieth century, music and poetry parted ways. Would you like to elaborate on that?

AN: Well, mainstream poetry decided to be prose with line breaks. And it decided to tell little boring stories. The novel became important in the nineteenth century, but

there was still a lot of very musical poetry. This form became a kind of prison. American poets couldn't use the nineteenth century and traditional British structures because they were meant for a different language. The Americans needed a different sound structure.

DM: It's sufficient to hear Allen Ginsberg, for example, to understand how much of this musical tradition remained in twentieth-century poetry.

AN: He was part of the avant-garde and not the mainstream. Allen took all of his cues from Walt Whitman, so there's a tradition that goes: Walt Whitman, Allen, and then other people who write long oratorical and singing poetry—a tradition where you use all the tricks that you can find in the poetry of the past. He was also very fond of William Blake. He liked the idea of Sapphics and of certain meters. I learned a lot from him.

DM: There's another essay in that collection where you claim that it's wrong to see William Carlos Williams as a prose poet.

AN: Oh, no, he's not. He did every possible thing you can do. He wrote little poems, he wrote long poems, he wrote poems that were prose and poetry mixed together. He wrote novels, he wrote short stories. He wrote plays. He tried every possible genre. He had a very particular music and he changed it when he got old. There are two parts of his work that have really influenced me, and one part is where he mixes prose and poetry. The other part is in the variable foot. It's a musical concept.

Alice Notley, Air Code Music, collage (left); Memory (right), both 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

DM: Many of your poems channel words from the dead. There is a strong tradition of dictation from elsewhere, starting with Blake through H.D. and William Butler Yeats to Jack Spicer. How do you see yourself in relation to that tradition?

AN: No, no, it's not coming from a tradition in that way. The part where it's dictated is not coming from a tradition. It's not aesthetic. I never really expected to be dictated to, but it started happening to me when I was twenty-seven. I was living in England, and I woke up one day with this whole poem in my head. It was just there, and I could see the whole thing. I knew what every word of it was. And I spent the day writing it down. I would take care of my son Anselm and I would do things with my husband Ted and our visitors, and then I would go and write some more of it down. And I had it written down by the end of the day. It was six pages long. It's one of my best poems. It was given to me. I wrote it down and it looked a little bit different from what I first saw. And then when I typed it, it was different again.

DM: That makes me think about one more aspect of your work. What's the role of memory in relation to this type of dictation?

AN: I was writing poems in the seventies and into the eighties, they were conversational. I trained myself to remember conversations verbatim. Now I don't have the same kind of memory. I stopped using verbatim conversation because I moved to a country where I didn't know the language. So, it's been difficult to keep that part of my practice going. When I'm in contact with whatever dictates to me, it seems to happen while I'm writing. The fact of writing itself makes me sensitive to voices. It's become a way of contact. It's like a crystal ball.

DM: Your essay on the influences of music ends with an explanation of the distinction between music and poetry: "But the voice of it is more than the vocal voice: a voice in my brain rolled up on skeins in cells, which can be taken out and read through. I possess the voice/poem in both the rolled-up and extended form. A poem is about knowing

Alice Notley, Air Code Music, collage (left); Memory (right), both 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

something both all at once and in its unrolling in time. A song is more about being in time."[3] I think this resonates with a wonderful book by Douglas Oliver entitled *Poetry in Narrative and Performance.* He stresses this tension between eternity and instance.

AN: That was his idea of poetic stress. The entire mystery of the universe was contained in the poetics and the fact that you can't ever find the stress. You can't locate it exactly because it's this blank place. I think that when you write a poem, you actually enter a blank space. And when you're writing, you are actually feeling nothing. What the poetry is about is not taking place. Some blank thing is happening. And then you define it by before and after. There's some kind of bleeding between before and after your entry into the blank space.

If you take a short poem and you read it, then once you've read it, you have it. You always have it and it's always there inside you. You don't have to go through the time of it because you have it. You own it even if you can't remember it. It's there and you can keep thinking about it and you can keep finding more things in it. But it exists all at once at that point inside you. Whereas I don't think you could do that with music or with the novel. The minute you're finished with the poem you're invited to go back into it.

DM: There might be comparable phenomena in music. For example, in some minimal music or even in more traditional music forms you have an exposition of motive and then the variations that always revolve around it. There's progress and stillness at the same time—stability and movement.

AN: Music is about is being in the moment. I always have it in my head, and I absorbed a lot of music when I was young. I never have anything to play music with. I still have music in my head, and I know it the same way as I know poems, actually. I'm realizing that as I talk to you.

DM: Both Douglas Oliver and you bring up this fascinating example of "Black Mountain Blues" by Bessie Smith. She repeats the same line in that song but stresses different meanings. This is not something you can do in written poetry.

AUDIO

AN: She was his idol.

DM: Oliver included a diagram of these lines that shows how in music you can create meaning in different places using stress.

AN: In poetry you don't do it as markedly. You can distort words if you take musical examples and imitate them.

DM: What you just said connects with your notion of instability in poetry. Would the act of inscribing a strong stress limit that basic quality?

AN: In contemporary poetry stress tends to be unstable. I'm never totally sure where it is. I don't think about it. When I invented the form of *Descent of Alette* I wasn't thinking about stress. I was thinking about what *The Iliad* sounded like. I'd written most of *Alette* at one point, but I hadn't written the beginning yet, and then I got a tape of *Oh Mercy*, the album by Bob Dylan. I listened to the song "The Man in the Long Black Coat" and then I wrote the first two pages of that book. They are influenced by his singing.

AUDIO

DM: The British writer Patrick Langley recently published a novel entitled *Variations*. It's about a group of people who have the ability to hear the dead. The protagonist is a composer who uses this gift as a compositional tool. There is one particular moment I think you might like. The character claims that minimal music works through variations because this is how the dead experience time. They're constantly suspended outside of time, so they relive the same moments.

AN: That's not how it is. That idea is really rooted in our basic idea of time. It's almost impossible to conceive of what time is for the dead. It's a completely other thing. All minimal music is about time, and other kinds of music are perhaps less about time than minimal music. I'm thinking particularly of Anton Weber's *Symphony*. Because that's something I used to know. It's "Opus 21," a very short piece around ten minutes long. And you can have it once you've heard it. I wrote a paper on it once when I was in college. I went through and traced out all the tone rows. I didn't know I was a poet yet and I couldn't understand how people could write music. I got an A minus on the paper because the teacher couldn't figure out why I was doing it. You're supposed to come to a conclusion about something or other. Instead, I was just analyzing the structure. I was very pleased to be able to find out where the tone rows were. I can still remember what the beginning of it sounds like. I haven't listened to it in many, many years.

DM: I also wanted to ask you about a recent development: your visual poems and the drawings you started making.

AN: I did them for three years. I've always made drawings and I've made collages for a long time. It was something that a lot of the poets in New York did. It gradually became part of my writing practice. I noticed that I would have to do some collages whenever I started a new book—I would have to do some artwork. The artwork would help me think about the work I was writing, and it was a way of engaging with form without having to be articulate about it. In 2019 I got a new mini iPad, and the salespeople were encouraging me to buy an Apple Pencil. And then I just discovered I could do these little things: I could make a little drawing and I could write a little poem or some words. They were great to do during Covid. I've never read them. I think I would have to make a different work if they had to be for reading aloud.

Back in 1974 I was in Chicago. I was taking an antidepressant and it made me want to do collages. And it was the only thing I wanted to do. I thought, "But I still have to write poems." So, I put words on the collages. And then at a certain point I typed up all the words on the collages and made them into a poem. It's kind of a book-length poem, but it's not very traditional. It's never been published.

DM: In one of your recent volumes of poetry, entitled *For the Ride*, you're doing drawings with words in a manner that feels close to concrete poetry.

AN: *For the Ride* goes into this dimension that I hadn't really seen in physical form. And I was afraid that it would be boring because there was nothing visual to hold on to. Visual aspects have always been very important to me in my poetry. So, I decided to make illustrations. It gives additional narrative flow to the whole poem. In the nineteenth century books had illustrations of the characters.

DM: You have a new book coming out in April, right?

AN: *Being Reflected Upon*—it's a memoir of the last seventeen years counting back from when I wrote it, which was in 2017. I had done the treatment for breast cancer in 2016–17. I was trying to figure out if this was important. The book is also about what had happened since 2000, which was the year Doug died. It's in the first person, and it's a person talking about things that have happened. It presents a kind of worldview that's based on vibratory particles. There are a lot of musical references in it, including to a composer named Sofia Gubaidulina, who was working with microtones:

To Remake It w/Microtones

I'm sending youse a big bouquet of Roses
not being this person think of another
am I or am I not
with you in Rockland

will then go to Edinburgh
because I'm reading an Inspector Rebus
there is a tiny coffin the wind sings Marie
I'm wearing it as a talisman
Several times the Russian microtonalist Gubaidulina explains that she had to look UP
I first met Carl Salomon at the Gotham Book Mart

Or is this 12-tone a dozen the city is
breathtaking but only human
my plan is to stifle my humanity
no one knows what I mean do you Allen
I was not reborn he says your system is
correct and I am here and anywhere

Edinburgh the city of humiliation
what would be good for confessionalist
to say so I could be reviewed in the
New Yorker the city of what's that word for what I
[pre]free association they said I am not human I freely associate raising and lowering
[pre]the tone What are you trying to remember

big black castle paste in on the new collage
“Are these just notes for a poem?” Maria asked of
[pre]“A California Girlhood” I could
say I am not eschewment
I am remaking even you with the pieces or
are they the firsts the new ones re-
combinatory of their smallest bits
“Are you of your times or one time?”
I will always be with you

Anything I would remember might be
[pre]you even a false one of the Museum of Hearts and
[pre]Corpses I’m taking létrozole for breast cancer
so I’m plugged into the culture nevertheless
I say “I” so you can understand me
but only I know what I am
at this microprint in the wind that I am also

X

Alice Notley was born in Bisbee, Arizona in 1945 and grew up in Needles, California in the Mojave Desert. She is the author of numerous books of poetry, and of essays and talks on poetry, and has edited and coedited books by Ted Berrigan and Douglas Oliver. She is the recipient of the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award, the Griffin Prize, the Academy of American Poets’ Lenore Marshall Prize, and the Poetry Foundation’s Ruth Lilly Prize, a lifetime achievement award. Notley may be most widely known for her epic poem *The Descent of Alette.* Recent books include *Eurynome’s Sandals, Certain Magical Acts,*

Benediction, and *For the Ride*. Notley is also a collagist, cover artist, and maker of hybrid art objects. An art book, *Runes and Chords*, was published in 2023.

Daniel Muzyczuk is the chief curator at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Poland. He has curated numerous projects, including “ *Through the Soundproof Curtain: The Polish Radio Experimental Studio”* (with Michał Mendyk), ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2019; “ *Tobias Zielony: Dark Data”* (with Kathleen Rahn), Marta Herford, 2022; and “ *Citizens of the Cosmos: Anton Vidokle with Veronika Hapchenko, Fedir Tetyanych and the Collection of the International Cosmist Institute*,” Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 2022. Muzyczuk also served as cocurator of a Konrad Smoleński exhibition for the Polish Pavillion at the 55th Venice Biennale, 2013 (with Agnieszka Pindera). His upcoming book is entitled *Twilight of the Magicians* (Spector Books).

1
Alice Notley, *Close to Me and Closer … (The Language of Heaven) and Desamere* (O Books, 1995), 5.

2
The Descent of Alette (Penguin, 1992), 5.

3
Telling the Truth as It Comes Up: Selected Talks & Essays 1991–2018 (Song Cave, 2023), 131.

Daniel Muzyczuk

Ten Lessons in Clairaudience

The hearing of what is inaudible is called "clairaudience"—the aural equivalent of clairvoyance. Another term for this ability would be "remote hearing." Just as in clairvoyance (from the French for "clear vision"), the one who hears clearly defies space-time determinants. The notion of clairaudience may be rarely encountered, be we can nevertheless trace it as a consistent concern in music and poetry making, perhaps starting with the following ten examples.

1.

Graphic scoring, with its deviations from traditional notation, can aid open-ended composition and performance. *B Vor* is a graphic score by Katalin Ladik that is characteristic of her work from the 1970s. A performer and poet from Vojvodina, Serbia, Ladik is known for assembling unusual materials into collage-based music notations for her own voice. As a cue for musical performance, a visual object can unleash unanticipated sonic interpretations. This quality is nothing new in the world of musical scores, which are all "structures that want to become other structures," to borrow a quote from Pier Paolo Pasolini. Yet there is a temporal aporia that makes *B Vor* and other works of its kind stand out from both conventional notations and other graphic scores. To create the score, Ladik covered a paper with fragments of dress patterns from women's magazines, which were meant to aid in DIY dressmaking in socialist states suffering material shortages. The irony in these complex artworks is unavoidable. Ladik's naked performances often sparked scandal, and in her scores the objects representing voice are designs used to cover the body. The temporal vibration of air is represented by a spatial object—one that is flat but suggests a potential to expand into three dimensions by transforming into a song or a sculpture. It stands outside of time while also being a time-based structure. I think this potential arises from Ladik's vocal and visual work that grows out of an involvement with poetry.

2.

British poet Douglas Oliver's book *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* investigates the speech patterns of performed poetry. He is interested in the instability of stress and its complex relationship to the passage of time:

> A stress is born in time, and in sound, meaning and emotion; but it also stands outside time in a sort of minor, eternal present, a trembling instant which half stands still, partly resisting the flow of the line which creates it. It probably represents a little model of how our minds relate the instant of time to the flow of time; here lies its great fascination.[1]

Simone Forti, Past Future, 2013. Pencil on paper. Collection of Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, Poland. Courtesy of the artist and The Box LA.

Oliver links this quality to modernist aesthetics by quoting T. S. Eliot. The problem of locating the stress in poetry is associated with poets like Eliot, Ezra Pound, and H.D., who all saw poetry as occupying a strange territory where the present and the perennial meet. This relates to what Alice Notley calls the "instability" of poetry, where unfixed meaning forms outside of time, only to be actualized during the reading of a poem. A poem exists in an eternal present, and Notley links this quality to the main difference between poetry and music:

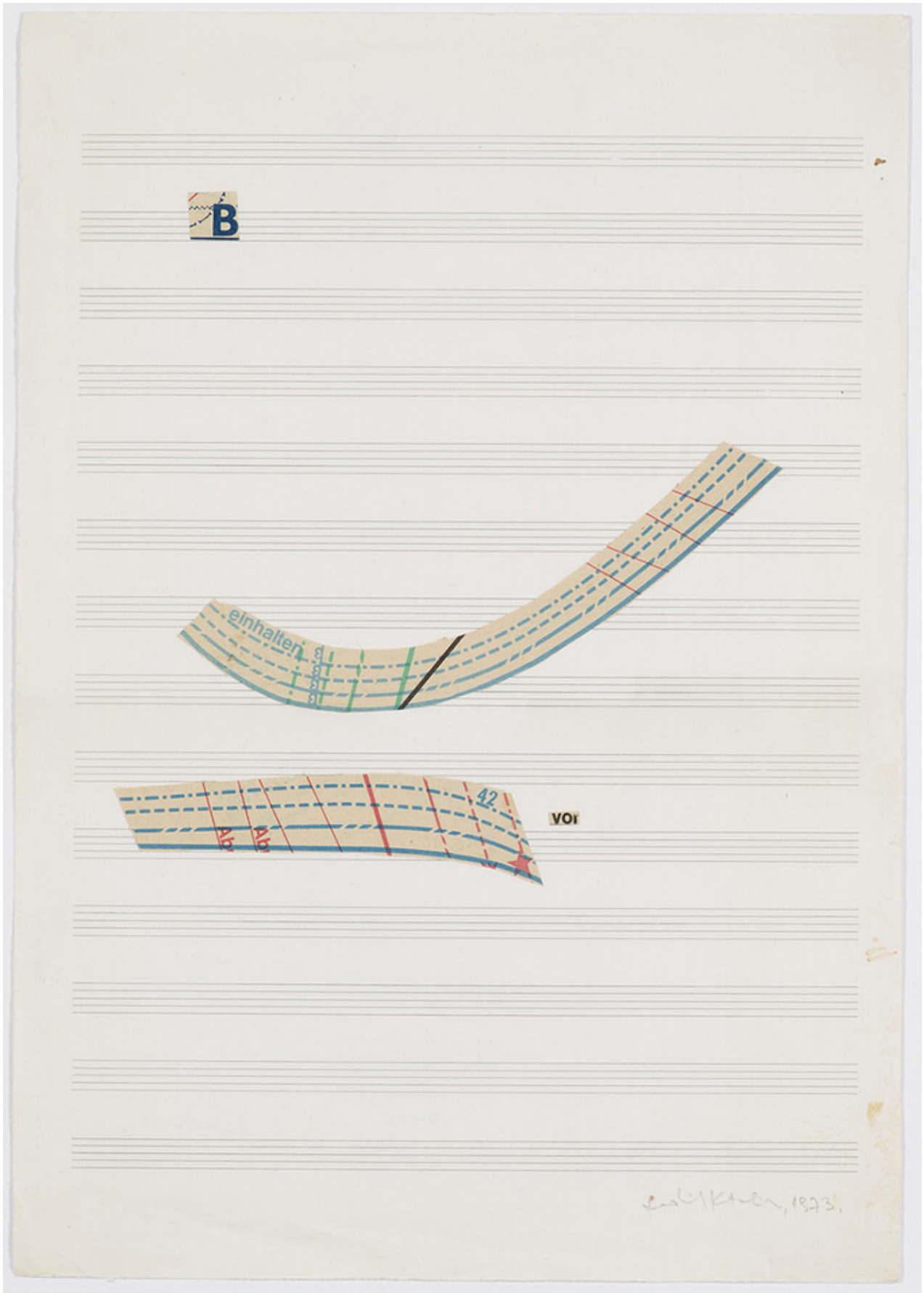
> But the voice of it is more than the vocal voice: a voice in my brain rolled up on skeins in cells, which can be taken out and read through. I possess the voice/poem in both the rolled-up and extended form. A poem is about knowing something both all at once and in its unrolling in time. A song is more about being in time.[2]

Could it be that in songs, the unfolding of time prevails over the eternal precisely because songs situate the stress?

3.

Morton Feldman opens his essay "XXX Anecdotes and Drawings" with a story:

> As you remember, Orpheus was a popular poet. He is like Frank Sinatra. He is in modern dress and he's walking down Paris streets and a girl stops him for an autograph and he goes to the avant-garde café and asks an elderly artist there what he is lacking. Why do all the other artists ignore him when he comes in? What's wrong with his work? And the old man hands him a book and says this is the latest rage. He picks up



Katalin Ladik, B Vor, 1973. Collage. Collection of Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, Poland. Courtesy of the artist.

> the book and he's looking at empty pages, you see, and he is out of it somewhat, and he hands the book back to the old man, who looks over and says to him, "Astonish us!"[3]

This story sounds like a joke on Feldman's old friend John Cage, even if the score of Cage's infamous *4:33* (1952) did contain at least a few symbols. The story is actually based on Jean Cocteau's 1950 film *Orpheus*, which itself is based on a myth about a poet who travels to the land of the dead. In the film, Jacques Cégeste, the author of a blank book called *Nudisme*, is killed. Then he begins transmitting cryptic messages from the beyond through a car radio. Orpheus receives these messages and publishes them as his own poetry. Among the messages is the phrase " *Les oiseaux chantent avec les doigts*" (Birds sing with their fingers), an enigmatic line that Guillaume Apollinaire inscribed on a watercolor he painted for Pablo Picasso. He also wrote it in a letter to Cocteau.

Is Feldman claiming that his own music comes from elsewhere? Not necessarily. In fact, Feldman may have learned about the work of Cocteau through a friend, the poet Frank O'Hara.

4.

This reception of otherworldly messages in *Orpheus* connects to the tradition of dictation in American poetry. San Francisco poet Jack Spicer might have been a listener to that car radio. He claimed ironically that his work came from Martians. Maybe he wanted to avoid being associated with a belief in the afterlife, so he positioned himself at the end of a radio wire that transmitted poetry into his brain, with Spicer himself as merely a mediator or receiving instrument. He did not necessarily agree with the content of these Martian poems, and they sometimes contradicted his own worldview. In the first part of Spicer's long poem *The Heads of the Town up to the Aether* (1960), Cégeste reappears, dictating again. In the quasi-theoretical final part of the poem, Martians transmit lines of poetry that figure the wire as a levitating rope from "the Indian rope trick":

> And a little Indian boy climbs up [the rope]. And the Jungians and the Freudians and the Social Reformers all leave satisfied. Knowing how the trick was played.
>
> There is nothing to stop the top of the rope though. There is nothing to argue. People in the audience have seen the boy dancing and it is not hypnosis.
>
> It is the definition of the rope that ought to interest everyone who wants to climb the rope. The rope-dance. Reading the poem.
>
> Reading the poem that does not appear when the magician starts or when the magician finishes. A climbing in-between. Real.[4]

Here dictation is the condition for another moment of transmission—that of reading. Reading happens "in-between" because it activates a poem that is otherwise outside of time, "that does not appear when the magician starts or when the magician finishes." As text, the poem exists in its own eternal present. The rope levitating in midair without anything to hold it signals this moment of suspension.

5.

Rosemary Brown was a British medium who specialized in communicating with famous dead composers. Among her interlocuters were Debussy, Grieg, Liszt, Schubert, Chopin, Brahms, and Beethoven. She was closest to Liszt, who dictated a few posthumous works to her. He first appeared to her when she was seven, but she only realized it was Liszt when, ten years later, she saw his picture in a book. Between 1964—when Liszt began to transmit new work to her—and her death in 2001, she helped these composers bring more than one thousand works into the world. Her performances of some of these compositions were recorded and released by Philips.

It's difficult to compare this case to the others I've described. There's a surprising moment in a 1976 BBC documentary on Brown when she says that Liszt and Chopin have become fluent English speakers while in the land of the dead, even if they have strong accents. This is puzzling. In the lessons I described above, the suspension of time allows for transmission to happen. But here, ghosts relax and have tea while practicing their English vocabulary. Even if they learned to speak the language, isn't it strange that they have accents? Should a ghost have an accent?

In fact, an accent is just like a composer's signature style: a small detail that reveals the origin of a given piece, whether by Liszt or another famous composer. Style was what experts looked for when examining the scores written down by Brown for confirmation of life after death. But why should a dead composer have the same style as when they were alive?

Film still, Orpheus, dir. Jean Cocteau, 1950.

6.

In the late 1970s, a strange book caused a stir in the American music world. *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* by Julian Jaynes is based on a close reading of Homer's *Iliad*. Jaynes noticed that in this epic poem, gods have such direct influence over men that men can absolve themselves from fault by claiming no agency over their deeds. For Jaynes, this is a remainder from a time when hearing voices was a form of communication between the two hemispheres of the brain. The "voice" in one's head was conceptualized as a god. Initially, everyone had their own individual godly voice, before the gods were externalized and unified into the deities of the Greek pantheon. A key part of Jaynes's argument concerns hexametric poetry, which, he assumes, was originally sung or hummed:

> If we erase all our preconceptions about poetry and act toward the poem as if we had never heard of poetry before, the abnormal quality of the speech would immediately arrest us. We call it meter nowadays. But what a different thing, these steady hexameters of pitch stresses, from the looser jumble of accents in ordinary dialogue! The function of meter in poetry is to drive the electrical activity of the brain, and most certainly to relax the normal emotional inhibitions of both chanter and listener. A similar thing occurs when the voices of schizophrenics speak in scanning rhythms or rhyme. Except for its later accretions, then, the epic itself was neither consciously composed nor consciously remembered, but was successively and creatively changed with no more awareness than a pianist has of his improvisation.[5]

The basic rhythmic structures of poetry, then, are rooted in the brain's electric currents. Through chanting or speaking, an epic poem is created, with variations from one speaker to the next.

7.

Jaynes's book influenced many composers. Even if we think his theory is wrong (as many did), it offers a generative foundation for text and music. "Blue" Gene

Photograph of the Indian rope trick, May 1917. Photo: F. W. Holmes. License: Public domain.

Rosemary Brown

Tyranny was influenced by Jaynes's idea of the bicameral mind while writing "Out of the Blue / A Letter from Home about Sound and Consciousness," a long composition from his first record, *Out of the Blue* (1978). It begins with the sound of a train transforming into synth tones. Though meant to create scenery for the composition to unfold, these sounds also have another function. Like shifting waves in the Doppler effect, their pitch changes. Tyranny's chords evolve, continuing the sense of movement. Alternations suggest a constant ascent, but also sonic illusions. A voice reads a letter to Tyranny, mixing memories with fragments and imagining the world under the reign of the bicameral mind:

> The people are peaceful, there's no government, and nothing is an example of anything. There are no words for "past, present, future" or "madness." It's always the first time. However, there is a voice that appears to each of them, barely distinct, softly, in between the other sounds, living. One side of the brain in each person is slowly sending pulses through to the other side. It is inevitable, according to this ordered-out theory, that an imaginary space, somewhere in the back of your mind, gets occupied by someone called "I" who floats around in the same space it has created. Then we skipped a few thousand years to watch that unidentified inner voice become embodied in the voice of the ruler. Statues were in the center of town, just like today. Images of ancestors with large eyes, eye to eye contact, time ceases to exist … Eight thousand or maybe six thousand years ago, when young women were possessed oracles and older men were hot-blooded prophets for telling the future, their message was delivered in steady rhythmic verses. Always the same rhythm, no matter what language. From one side of the brain to the other. From invisible heaven to foggy earth. This was sunlight inside and outside, without yawning or blinking.

The female reader is unnamed, as is the writer of the letter. Narration clearly comes from the other side of the brain, yet unlike the gods of the *Iliad*, the voice does not give orders. The flow of narration is interrupted by female voices singing in chorus. The lyrics are fragments of the letter chosen for the similarity of their rhythm, which makes it sound like a proper chorus without repeated words. The narration is mediated through inner speech between the two sides of the brain and reduced to a rudimentary and poetic form. The piece exhibits a concordance between structural principles and lyrical content. Yet the libretto is not dictated; it is rather a staging of dictation.

8.

Out of the Blue was released by Lovely Music, a label run by Mimi Johnson, whose partner Robert Ashley was also a reader of Jaynes. Suffering from a mild version of Tourette's syndrome, Ashley was all the more interested in involuntary speech. He released the album *Automatic Writing* in 1979, shortly after Tyranny's *Out of the Blue* came out. Among other sounds, *Automatic Writing* features Ashley's own voice activated in "standby" mode. In an essay he wrote describing his method in *Automatic Writing*, Ashley mentions Jaynes:

> It is against the "law" of our society to engage in involuntary speech. That's why we are embarrassed to talk to ourselves. That's why Tourette had to leave the room. That's why we are embarrassed by poetry. (T. S. Eliot said that in composing poetry one is either talking to oneself or to God. Jaynes says that we are talking to God. Tourette had lost God.)[6]

In *Automatic Writing* Ashley's speech is directed neither at himself nor at God. It is not a conversation.

9.

In December 2023, Irish composer and vocalist Jennifer Walshe published an essay on how AI can generate images and music that seem uncannily similar to art.[7] As a vocalist, she focuses on voice and its simulations. Some of the points in her essay touch on the aspects of dictated music and poetry I'm discussing here. She links AI to Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP)—"ghost" voices perceived in radio-wave noise and electronic recordings. EVP are created through the repetition of sequences that, when listened to for a while, sound less and less arbitrary and more like messages from the beyond. Cocteau's film now begins to look like a manual: transmissions from Cégeste require multiple listens to be understood as poetry.

There is more. AI is reconstructing the voices of dead artists. Machines learning is analyzing their old records to produce "new" music by these artists. How will popular music evolve, given these developments? Walshe asks: "Will [musicians] release excess material, to ensure the fandom can accurately model their voice? Will the goal be to become successful enough to license a model of their voice, thereby ensuring continued monetisation?" Walshe concludes by positioning AI networks as a new type of companion species working together with us. They are helpful precisely because we cannot fully comprehend their logic; the results of their work escape simple description—despite being mostly language based. Walshe's album *A Late Anthology of Early Music Vol. 1: Ancient to Renaissance* (2020) is an unusual collaboration with AI. It was produced with a duo called Dadabots, who trained a neural network on recordings of Walshe's voice. The network was then instructed to use the recordings to create music in the style of early Western music. What resulted are strange recordings full of sighs, grunts, inhalations, and other human noises—voices from some future elsewhere filtered through an ancient form.

10.

AI may just be the latest iteration of dictation, an elusive phenomenon that has given rise to an array of poetic and musical practices. Credible or not, the bicameral mind links disparate phenomena concerned with the rediscovery of the eternal present. Robert Duncan described reading James Joyce as like being immersed in timeless voices, a suspension that enables clairaudience:

> Joyce is also telling us he hears ... the armies of the dead and the unborn at the shores of consciousness, swarming invasions from a sleeping reservoir that press upon Joyce's waking mind, as all things of the waking world press upon his sleeping mind. What appears, whatever we see there, answers the call of his declaration of listening: "I hear ..." The beginning of the saying reaches out from the proposition of what it says, and hearing rushes in to illustrate the proposition. The speaker, speaking of his hearing, hears; the hearer sees. Clairaudient to the voice of the poem and then beyond, Joyce becomes clairvoyant. It is all in the medium of saying: second-speech begins; the second-hearing or second-sight comes to meet it.[8]

Katalin Ladik's graphic score that opened this essay, *B Vor*, has another interesting layer. It can be read as the beginning of a musical performance—but *when* is this beginning? Is it before the first visual impulse gives rise to the score? Or before the score is realized in performance? Or perhaps back when the dress designs were printed, later to be cut out and pasted onto music paper? The

score involves a constant retreat into earlier moments. This is what clairaudience might mean. Simone Forti has done drawings based on a sheet of paper with the words "future" and "past" written on opposites sides. The sheet is then crumpled up so that, in the resulting object, one can see fragments of both sides at the same time. Forti's drawings are always connected to a performance; they record movement. Yet here the metaphor of temporality can only be understood spatially, where different moments coexist. It is, to quote Notley again, "about knowing something both all at once and in its unrolling in time."[9]

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Daniel Muzyczuk is the chief curator at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Poland. He has curated numerous projects, including " *Through the Soundproof Curtain: The Polish Radio Experimental Studio"* (with Michał Mendyk), ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2019; " *Tobias Zielony: Dark Data"* (with Kathleen Rahn), Marta Herford, 2022; and " *Citizens of the Cosmos: Anton Vidokle with Veronika Hapchenko, Fedir Tetyanych and the Collection of the International Cosmist Institute*," Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 2022. Muzyczuk also served as cocurator of a Konrad Smoleński exhibition for the Polish Pavillion at the 55th Venice Biennale, 2013 (with Agnieszka Pindera). His upcoming book is entitled *Twilight of the Magicians* (Spector Books).

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Kimberly Alidio

On Being Porous

On Magical, Worldly Language

My book *Teeter* is composed of three long poems. The book opens with a poem on Catskill Creek, a branch of the Hudson River, as it appeared to me when I arrived as a new transplant to New York State. The book closes with a declarative statement: "This is how I am at the river." Between the first moment of surrealistic sensory encounter and the second moment of speech is a meditation on languages and listening. The first long poem, entitled "Hearing," is an ekphrastic engagement with sound/performance poems—by N. H. Pritchard, Lily Greenham, Susan Howe with David Grubbs, Henri Chopin—and experimental music—by Maryanne Amacher, claire rousay, Lea Bertucci, Amirtha Kidambi, Danishta Rivero, and Las Sucias. The middle poem, "Ambient Mom," meditates on my echoic and episodic memories of Philippine languages—Pangasinan and Tagalog—that are semantically foreign to me but inherent in my body, my ear, and my (writing) voice. "Histories," the concluding sequence, is what I call an auto-historiography: a series of performative, incantatory, voice-over prose poems on how the fictions of my historicity—my origins and position in historical time—are made.[1]

I wrote *Teeter* as a poet engaged in a sustained practice of writing-while-listening to experimental music, sound art, and sound poetry, and also to speech in the two Philippine languages I grew up with but which I've never spoken, read, or written. I wrote *Teeter* while dwelling on diasporic people, particularly those who form multilingual immigrant households that flourish within, rather than in spite of, intermittent breaks in the flows of communication. During such disfluent events, people use all their senses, perceptual skills, phatic and paralinguistic tactics, and paratactical, associational thinking-feeling capacities. These are *Teeter*'s vernacular poetics.

I approach the autonomous, magical, worldly power of language's sonic, voiced, and prosodic multidimensionality in many ways. Southeast Asian Studies scholar Vicente L. Rafael proposes that translation has been at the heart of Filipino survival across centuries of Spanish, US, Japanese, and neocolonial-autocratic regimes.[2] In a historical landscape of approximately 180 Indigenous languages and several languages of religious conversion and political occupation, Filipinos have critically read, interpreted, and recast colonial logics in the course of their everyday lives. In these political contexts, disfluencies are part of everyday life, and the sensory experiences of speech and text are as critical as cognitive comprehension in figuring out how to live. I was once a young historian employed to help build the nascent field of Filipino Studies, and during this academic work, Rafael was to me a senior scholar with whom I distantly engaged in terms of career protocol. I'm glad now to credit his scholarship as one influence on my poetics. I'm glad to be a bit freer from observing territorial markers of academic fields and methods.

Jasper Francis Cropsey, Catskill Creek, 1850, oil on canvas. Smithsonian American Art Museum. License: Public Domain.

To translate is not just to bear meanings from one language to another but to engage languages beyond territories. Whereas Rafael theorizes that language is an "agent" of Filipino history that "exceeds human control," I've proposed in a series of poetics essays that the embodied experience of language-noise and language-music is a resource beyond extractive identity politics.[3] I turned these essays into a series of poems in *Teeter*, and consequently took the liberty of removing quotation marks. At least one commenter attributes to me a phrase uttered by musician Craig Taborn: "In my own work, I try to leave some noise."[4] In the same poem, there are lines (which were once a sentence) that I did write: "A property relation between speaker &/ word softens." I say the line is my own to point out a tension between authorship and ownership of language.

I stumbled on a technique of writing "poetic voice" transcriptions/scores as a result of dwelling over the course of a year or two on the genealogical relationship between how I use language and the heritage languages I've been passively absorbing all my life. I've been interested in whether culturally indigenous Philippine languages leave formal traces in my colonial American English. My query took the form of a poetic contemplation on my quotidian, domestic, and maternal intimacies in the immigrant diaspora. In other words, I chose to write translingual, sonically informed poems rather than learn how to speak and write Tagalog and Pangasinan. I chose to make a transcription-score for a "poetic voice" starting with a query about the traces of non-colonial and anti-colonial knowledge in the affective prosodies that come out of my embodied writing. In the Western literary canon, a "poetic voice" is a poet's pure expression of their innermost self, but I am hoping to deflect attention away from my particular social persona and towards the sonic, sounded voice in the worlds of a poem.

It occurs to me now that the historical, anthropological, and cultural research I once conducted on the Filipino postcolonial diaspora was never going to amount to anything other than preparation for a life of writing poems and poetic essays. I can say with more conviction as a poet than I did as an academic historian that the practice of doing "translational work" across institutionalized disciplines—which includes sustaining patterns of disfluency—has been a definitive, vernacular resource for Filipino vitality across three centuries of colonialism into

the postcolonial present. Vicente Rafael has tracked the linguistic registers inflecting Filipino life during the sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Spanish colonial-religious regime, the republican nationalist and peasant revolutions, US colonial rule, the anti-dictatorship movements, and twenty-first-century global labor migrations.[5]

The translingual and interdisciplinary arts of the Filipino postcolonial diaspora are the material "worldliness," as Edward Said theorized it, of *Teeter*. In "Theory as Stone," an essay published in late January 2024 on the *Social Text* website, Stephen Sheehi wrote about Said's 2001 disinvitation from the Freud Society of Vienna on account of a famous photograph of Said throwing a stone at an Israeli Occupation Force guard tower at the Lebanese border. Sheehi recasts Said's theory of worldliness so that it might resonate for a reader accessing these words on day 111 of the Israeli genocide in Gaza, the January 25, 2024 publication date of his essay: "For Said, texts, images, and objects are of their moment and place—but the fullness of their latent meaning only comes to the surface at any subsequent political moment."[6]

In the northern Philippines during the early 1900s, my maternal great-grandfather was the principal of a school built by the United States Bureau of Insular Affairs. Not long after the US colonial occupation and a genocidal war against nationalists, Indigenous communities, Muslims, and the rural majority, a new public school system opened with English as the language of instruction. My grandmother, daughter of the Filipino principal and student in his US colonial primary school, was part of the first generation which, at an early age, entered a totalizing institution that subjected her to the English language through immersion. She spoke Pangasinan and Tagalog only outside the school grounds. The compulsory limit that disciplined my grandmother would signal to her the logics of languages operating "otherwise," beyond themselves. Still, the "otherwise" is signaled only partially by a legible or visible "other" to colonial logics, such as folklore. Literary scholar Edgar Garcia theorizes the unabsorbed, unbothered, autonomous presences of sign systems and tools of knowing that have existed and continue to exist fractally, invisibly, materially, and immaterially alongside, amidst, and contemporaneously with, and despite, the world visible to the neoliberal, colonial eye.[7] Can a person sense these presences? In my case, is my US-American English a product of not only my private-school education but my parents' and my grandparents' Philippine English? Can a translingual poem make "otherwise" sign systems sonically and visually felt?

I'm thinking about a tenure-track scholar's brief autobiographical confession of a North American childhood spent not understanding her parents' spoken Tagalog. I'm genuinely sad that her subsequent sentences are a pastiche of academic concepts, and I just want to splice and loop the vivid scene to stretch out the inevitable, dull turns in prose. It occurs to me that she is sampling phrases into a Sound-Studies-cum-Queer-Diaspo ric-Studies-cum-Autoethnography insider text. I get provocatively stuck on her forcefully magical trust in Academic English. The sentimental, grief-stricken, avenging uncanniness is what makes me queasy. The will to conjure something from colonial language is the "otherwise" haunting the algorithm. Beneath the heavy academic-art-world terms of essay writing is my affective, interdisciplinary sensing of her affective, interdisciplinary composition.

Said asked: "Is there no way of dealing with a text and its worldly circumstances fairly? No way to grapple with the problems of literary language except by cutting them off from the more plainly urgent ones of everyday, worldly language?"[8] Said asked this of the academic practice of literary criticism, which prompted Sheehi's reminder that Édouard Glissant called academia a "dimensionless place" that monopolizes intellectual thought and writing for its own ideas of what should be abstracted and what is material about the world.[9]

Teeter reflects the cultural practice of being in and of the world, which requires modulating what is concrete and what is theoretical, what is material and what is abstraction. The theme I want to pick up on here is that the historical translation practices forming Filipino postcolonial worlds provide me the grounding to write poems with nonliterary material, including music. *Teeter* collaborates with recordings and video documentation of sound art, musical performances, and speech—what composer David Grubbs calls "collaboration-after-the-fact." These poems accompany digital sound collages, video-capture spectrograms of Pangasinan- and Tagalog-language speech, and a video documenting what composer Cassandra Miller might call my "transformative mimicry" of Pangasinan speech captured from YouTube video blogs.[10]

Still, *Teeter* isn't interdisciplinary in terms of literary genre but interdisciplinary in its composition. I would be happy for the book to be experienced as an experimental documentary text or a textual transcription (a transformative mimicry) of heritage language, sound art, and music, but, only if somewhere along the way, it's read as a book of poems and nothing else. A poem becomes an inclusive, generative field of worldliness. I consider the languages of my heritage and histories as the sonic, graphic, quotative, textual, digital, perceptual, and vibrational material for more material—for poetry in many forms. Languages, in the plural, are the material of poems, and the material of their worldliness. They are the sign systems, sonic signals, and techne of living presences that many forces—including colonialism and Western literary/art canons—are trying to disappear. I remain interested in language practices of mimicry, tactical diversity, and disfluent, everyday living within and against colonial occupation—but without reactivity, which largely replicates the separation of self from the world that our

Botong Francisco, Filipino Struggles Through History, 1964. National Museum of Fine Arts, Manila. License: Fair Use.

"worldliness" refuses. I'm interested in art-making that isn't severed from the creative experimentation of surviving, that aligns and affiliates with autonomous movements resisting fascisms in our time.

On Droning

Music is a kind of sound, and poetry is a kind of language. Sounds are arranged into music, as language is arranged into poetry. But what's considered "musical" or "poetic" moves us beyond formal arrangement, beyond even their respective media, into the realms of discourse. The sense of what's "musical" and what's "poetic" can differ and can definitely vary, but generally one looks to be moved, or even transported, into realms of feeling, spirit, and memory. This is the lyrical mode: the ancient lyre shaped words—lyrics—into rhythmic and tonal patterns to give us poem forms—elegies, odes, sonnets—carrying song through language's musically inflected prosodies.

Synonyms for the modifier "lyric" in the phrase "lyric poetry" include: "melodic," "songlike," "musical," "rhapsodic," "deeply felt," "expressive," "personal," and "subjective." (Google's Oxford Languages also includes the synonym "poetic," which would mean that "lyric poetry" can also be called "poetic poetry.") This conventional meeting of music and poetry reinforces certain assumptions about language and the world. The first premise is that language's natural function is to order things into logical relationships for rational communication in a kind of prescriptive grammar of the world. Consequently, music's and poetry's aesthetic logics *speak* an interior self naturally at odds with that very external world. Lyric poetry's readers and writers might lament language as structurally inadequate to "capture" deeply felt moments of human experience, and what is considered "musical" or "poetic" is considered to be "beyond words." Tasked with creating a more or less harmonious resonance between interiority and society and between sensation and cognition, the lyric poem "spells it out" by "sounding it out."

Right now, I'm listening to Phill Niblock's "Hurdy Hurry," a song released in 2000, and thinking about his recent passing, while remembering that an art critic's social media tribute prompted me to listen to this piece. I can't find this tribute on the critic's social media account, which reminds me that a textual inscription, and particularly a digital one, may form an impression that is not reliably retrievable. A lost text may still write, so to speak. I've heard it said that the ear is a repertoire.

Just now, I remember that last night I watched John Cale's talking head in Todd Haynes's 2021 documentary *The Velvet Underground*. Influenced by composer and performer La Monte Young, Cale introduced drone music—the minimalist genre of drawn-out, sustained sounds—to the band. Cale and Young both approached

drone music as a meditative discipline. But let's break up this white, avant-garde, cis-boy band a little with some Alex Quicho:

> Here, the drone's double-meaning comes into its own as entrancing noise and wartime weapon. Prolonged exposure to a droning sound can be psychologically affecting. This capacity to alter mental states is what links the absorbing experience of [La Monte] Young's *Dream House* to that of residents of military "drone zones," where the sound of the drone, which can't be seen from the ground, minces a day into thousands of threatening moments.[11]

The apocalyptic vibe is invoked by the militarized air of the everyday soundscape as well as by the deep trance state created by the medieval dirge. Grief, remote-control warfare, otherworldly transport, avant-garde art, US-Israeli airstrikes, and the dilation of time and space are all in homophonic textures of sustained, repeating notes: "The ouroboric roundedness of droning sound contains the quantum ohm and om of nirvana."[12]

The two meanings of the drone—minimalist music and unmanned aerial vehicle—can't be reduced to a logical fallacy (for instance: John Cale's twentieth-century ambient minimalism is the soundtrack of US empire). But at the same time, there is something desperately antiseptic, even self-righteously pedantic, about how we use language to sense and think about ambient and avant-garde territories of musical sound. The same could be said of how we sense and think about poetry. I myself rely on music, or composed sound, to be a refuge from what Lauren Berlant calls "life-building."[13] I've tracked my auditory "sense door" on yearly silent meditation retreats, and at times fantasize about the sound baths at the Integratron in the Mojave Desert. I myself am drawn to the transcendent promises of spiritual as well as bodily practices that are at once metaphysical and capitalist. I can't tell the difference between a transcendent experience that's promised, expected, extracted, projected, ret-conned, or latent.

I'm uninterested in removing experience, whether quotidian or transcendent, from discourse, by which I mean the way experience is talked about. I'm curious about how an art practice of working with materials of daily life over time in the durative present generates knowledge in the body and in the brain as well as in resonant spaces of relation. I'm curious about the generative recasting of a political concept such as "internalized colonialism" into a compositional method of poetry. To an extent, I wrote *Teeter* to sense, up close and in real time, over time, the ways in which colonialism maps out one's insides and outsides. To track the "poetics" of colonialism, past and present, is to know that creative practices and intelligence come in many forms, towards many ends. Poetry and music are not the refuges from violence and genocide that people often rely on them to be. If they are refuges, they are refuges that bring us right back into the things we're trying to escape. But hopefully with a difference.

On Being Porous

Are the most immediate and intimate realms of our lives truly beyond words? Can feeling, sensation, affect, somatic epistemes, or temporal states of dailiness be adequately represented in language? According to Sound Studies scholars David Samuels and Thomas Porcello, Western philosophers since the Enlightenment have argued that language's "sonic enactments" (onomatopoeia, for example) are symbolically immature relative to its "cognitive properties," such as its "conceptual system of reference."[14] Philosophers splitting language's rational-communicative functions from its sensory and sonorous properties reinforce the boundary between the inner self from the outer world, "a binary separation of internal cognition from external vibration."[15]

While writing *Teeter*, I listened to recordings of sound poetry performances, looked at visual-concrete poems, and researched sound art installations. In homage to experimental and avant-garde poets, I compiled eight epigraphs by Barbara Guest, Mónica de la Torre, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Jennifer Moxley, Kamau Brathwaite, Gertrude Stein, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, and Etel Adnan (I added a ninth epigraph by Antonio Gramsci). Artists who do not make conventional music or poetry are a significant influence on *Teeter*. Still, I was left wondering how to write a translingual text with the worldliness of language that has never been split between cognitive function and sonorous, embodied dimensions. While sound, as Brandon LaBelle theorizes, "moves between inside and outside," how do the sonic properties of language do the same?[16] Perhaps a porous body receives music and sound, and perhaps a porous body writes in vibratory conversation with energetic forms.

I open Dodie Bellamy's essay collection *Bee Reaved*—a book on loss and grief—looking to reconstruct a vague memory of the way she speaks movingly about how writing and self-making are porous, permeable tactics. I read: "These communities of symbiotic bacteria and viruses and fungi that live on and inside my body are known as my microbiome, though I'm not sure 'my' is appropriate here."[17] But this is not quite what I'm looking for, so I open a browser tab to type a few keywords into a search engine. I glean from the internet that "porous" is often used in reference to New Narrative, a literary movement associated with Bellamy. A few minutes of scrolling, then back to *Bee Reaved*, where I read: "Online information, like avant-garde poetry or music, is a process, an onrush you experience moment by moment by moment, with no catchy tune, no overarching meaning, to

Roberto Chabet, Untitled (Drum & Shell).

pull it together."[18] I wonder whether my desire to concretize my memory of Bellamy *saying* something that has stayed with me is mediating this "onrush" of information, and that this moment-by-moment process is composing a poem without writing.

I open another tab to search my cloud-based file storage system, where I keep years' worth of reading and listening notes. Then: another tab to search for an episode of a podcast I listen to now and again. Bingo, but no provided transcript. I press the PLAY button on the podcast website and find what I'm looking for at 00:06:33. I move the dot-slider back and forth to transcribe Bellamy's vivid inquiry:

> I think an ongoing theme in my writing from the very beginning is like where do I end and where does the world begin and this kind of like fear of boundary invasion and the desire to be invaded so this whole like the fact that the most the bulk of us are like microbes and beings that aren't us like what's us and what isn't us I think is really kind of terrifying, right? And the stability of the self that you know deep down we all know is a lie but we try to maintain anyway it becomes really threatened.[19]

I start inserting into my transcript orthographic marks, such as commas, periods, and capitalization, to do what is called "light editing for clarity," but then I stop and start pressing Command-Z to undo the edits. Orthography has the grammatical function of setting boundaries around units of written text, so it is quite beautiful that Bellamy speaks here in a run-on sentence about the ambiguities of physiological and psychosocial boundaries. I love the liveness of Bellamy's vocal timbre, melodies, accent, and flow, what Catherine Rudent would call Bellamy's "palette of signifying sounds."[20] I love how the two uses of the quotative "like" pose big questions ("Where do I end and where does the world begin?" and "What's us and what isn't us?") as internal monologues reenacted conversationally with the interviewer. The conversation engages speech within a speech, much like a film inside a film, or recalled material inside the ongoingness of time.

I believe the sonic (what might be called "paralinguistic") and relational (or "phatic") energies of Bellamy's spoken language allow me to return to a point in time and space where I thought about porosity in a certain way. Over two years ago, I was walking down the hallway of my house toward my bathroom listening to Bellamy's podcast interview when I heard her speak on the ambiguity of self and community. The acoustic qualities of remembered language bring forth the architectural and kinesthetic experiences of making and hearing sounds. Episodic memory, once retrieved, can be intensely associative. Visualizing that moment of walking down my hallway, I remember reading the other day Christine Smallwood quoting Chantal Akerman as saying, "Those doors and hallways help me frame things, and they also help me work with time."[21]

The sonic and musical qualities of language open a world as a film opens. A good deal of *Teeter* is a listening text, evoking childhood memories not from the perspective of the adult present (the time of writing) but rather through immersion in an ongoing world that could become more known, more sensorily evoked, through writing. If my poems are a processing of my literary and linguistic influences, they must also be a processed form of patterned and looped impulses and signals, including the melodic contours and prosodic textures of the languages of my childhood. Evoking the noisiness and musicality of familial soundscapes brings me to particular speakers in my diasporic childhood rather than to a symbolic "mother tongue." A certain tonal utterance has trained me to understand specific commands beyond lexical communication.

Research on infant cry melodies shows that they take on the intonation patterns of "motherese." This follows a developmental narrative of musicality preceding speech, and suggests that speech intonations are not as instinctively driven by sensations of pain, pleasure, hunger, or fear as they are of imitation and learning. I have a line in "poem as abstraction of my voice" and another in "Ambient Mom" in which consonants clip the vowel cry. Still, I insist that as an adult there is musicality in my relationship to language—perhaps more so in everyday speech than in the organized language of poetry.

On Composing

After-the-fact collaboration grows from a practice of active dialogue across fluencies. A poet told me after a reading of *Teeter* that listening to me read poems was both listening to me read and then listening for what I was describing, transcribing, and recording in my *own* listening. Time lapse and re-situating make a work continually dynamic upon rereading, reviewing, and relistening. What if a work is continuously alive, and one opens the book or presses the PLAY button to catch it midstream?

This past week, I've been listening to recordings made by David Grubbs and poet Susan Howe. While writing *Teeter* 's first long poem, I watched video performances of some of their work. Grubbs has written that their sound recordings and their live performances are two distinct forms of collaboration because the performances are an extension of the recordings' scores.[22] The listening session that is generating this essay on *Teeter* is different from the one that generated *Teeter*. The composing continues as a loose, asynchronous ensemble in the infrastructural loops of labor: the many ears, eyes, cognition, embodiment, tools, time, channels, and

architectures.

X

Kimberly Alidio is the author of four poetry books: *Teeter*, *why letter ellipses*, *: once teeth bones coral :*, and *after projects the resound*, as well as *ROOM TONE* (Belladonna* Chaplet #297). Her fifth book of prose poems is forthcoming, and she is currently writing poetic-critical essays on contemporary diasporic art, film, and sound. She writes and teaches on Munsee-Mohican and Lenape lands along the Mahicannituck River, otherwise known as New York's Hudson Valley.

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Alessandro Bosetti

Singing the Zahir Away: Lucier Meets Borges

My fascination with the different mnemotechnical devices designed by Giordano Bruno and Giulio Camillo has often led me to wonder what a memory theater made of sounds instead of images might look like. Bruno, a philosopher, put forward a complex system of astronomical, linguistic, and alchemical correspondences with a neo-Platonic imprint. Giulio "Delminio" Camillo, also a philosopher, imagined a veritable theater of memory, centered around a stage. Technical designs aside, memory itself—"pure memory" as the philosopher Henry Bergson put it—remains an elusive subject.[1] In this text, I am interested in how sound memories can be absorbed and replaced by verbal simulacra such as descriptions and titles. To explore this, I put into conversation two figures who have often accompanied me in my reflections: the American composer Alvin Lucier (1931–2021) and the Argentine writer and poet Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986). I also interpose Bergson (1859–1941) as something of a mediator.

Linguistic Compression

During my frequent exchanges with experimental music enthusiasts, I am sometimes compelled to guess how a piece of music sounds based solely on a linguistic description of it. Lucier has come up countless times in these exchanges. Lucier's music, more than that of many other composers, lends itself to being evoked through anecdotes that invariably begin with: "There is a piece by Alvin Lucier in which …" As a result of this opening, and through an exquisitely linguistic analogical and metaphorical process, I have seen entire aural worlds be collapsed into cramped and synthetic verbal propositions. Lucier's case is ironic in that as a composer he was particularly interested in the materiality of sound.

Even in the case of more classical musical forms, language plays a role in activating recollection: Beethoven's *Third* is "heroic," Mahler's *Eight* "gigantic," Webern's *Lieder* series is aphoristic "like a haiku," Debussy's symphonic works are "*flou*" (vague). But in Lucier's music—as in that of his contemporaries like Alison Knowles, John Cage, George Brecht, Yoko Ono, the early La Monte Young, and in others who produced text scores—the summarizability of the idea seems to be accentuated, while sensation seems to collapse into a sentence or series of sentences. In such work, language is a crucial agent in the process of transmission and remembrance. In the idiom around the works of the above composers, adjectives—which always evoke the possibility of a hypothetical reference object—are replaced by self-sufficient propositions that aim to take the place of the work.

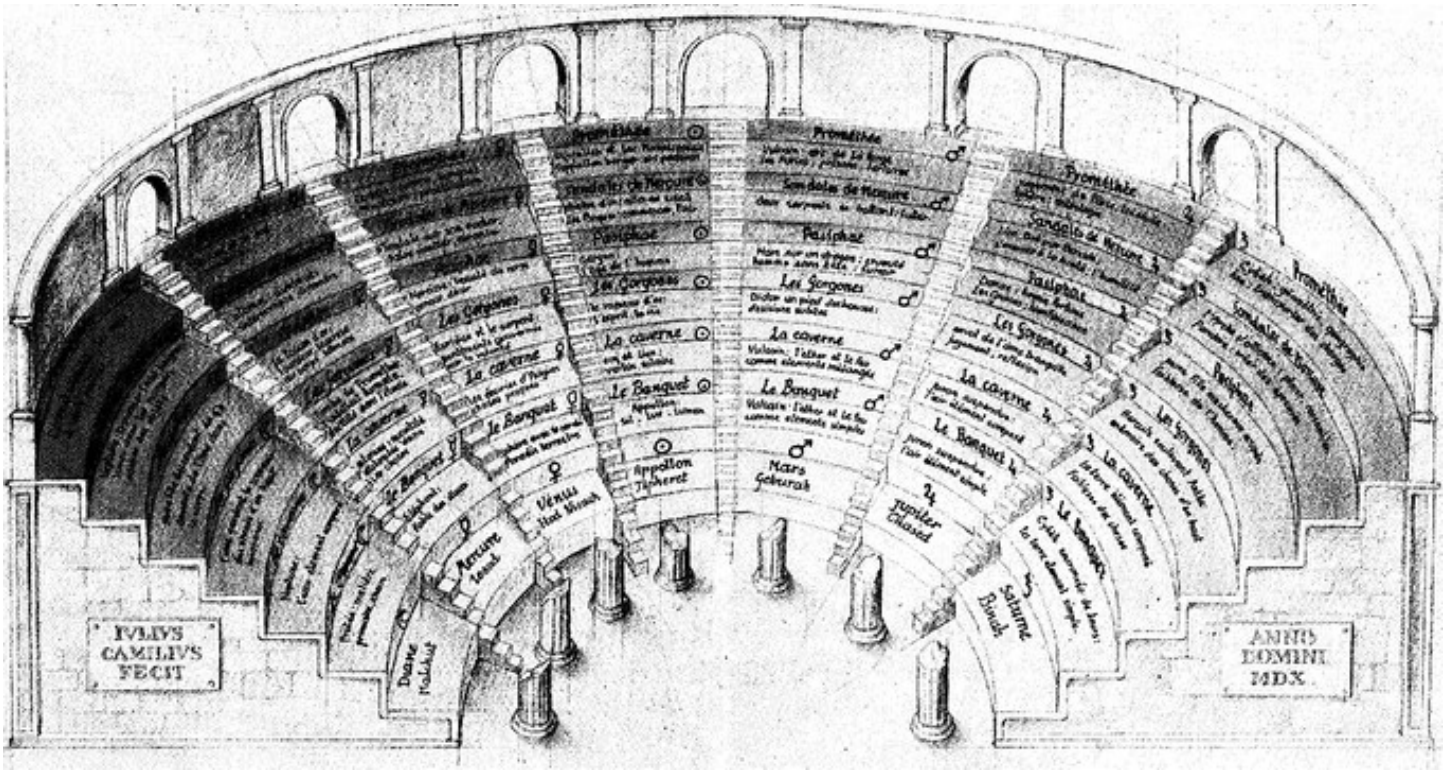
Lucier's music seems to transpose the memories of its auditory qualities into words. Jorge Luis Borges investigates a similar process for memories, audio or otherwise. Traversing his writings, one finds many allusions to the reduction of memories by language. The

Image courtesy of Alessandro Bosetti & Fatima Bianchi.

idea of the collapse of a lived experience into a linguistic formulation is already fully expressed in his 1947 short story "The Immortal" (published in the collection *El Aleph* in 1949) in which Borges writes: "When the end draws near, there no longer remain any remembered images; only words remain … I have been Homer; shortly, I shall be no one, like Ulysses; shortly, I shall be all men; I shall be dead."[2] The reason for this progressive collapsing of all memory into the two-dimensionality of a linguistic plane correlates to immortality, implying the infinite repetition of all possible circumstances. In other words, Borges seems to say that everyone will be everyone, sooner or later bound to write all possible books. In this conception of temporal events and their reduction to language, individual lives and consciousnesses are inexorably flattened to an infinitely repeated script: this is the final transformation of every memory into "words"—or sounds, we might add.

In the impassioned conversations among music enthusiasts mentioned above, such reductions into "words" have gradually changed form. Over the decades, they have gone from aggregates of adjectives proper to Romantic and post-Romantic music criticism to more objective utterances: brief descriptions, summaries of text scores, anecdotes apt to substitute themselves for the memory of the musical work they describe.

Well-known compositions by Lucier are summarized in simple colloquial language. To describe his work *I am sitting in a room* (composed in 1969) one could say: "There is a piece by Alvin Lucier in which a text is recorded, the recording of which is in turn recorded several times in the same room, until the resonant frequencies of the room in question take over and transform the initial utterance into a drone." However, such simplistic formulas are incommensurate with the physical, direct, temporal experience of listening to these works, even if the formulas are successful in evoking their mechanics. This latter fact indicates that the formulas can be bearers of meaning, more agile and manageable than the composition or score. What interests me here is not analyzing Lucier's "text-based scores" or examining how he conceives of the way they function. Rather, I'm interested in how, *after* the piece has been created *and* performed, it can continue to exist as a memorized "linguistic composition," an anecdotal reduction that circulates in informal conversations, articles, reviews,



Imaginary reconstruction of Giulio Camillo's Theatre, seventeenth century.

essays, and academic discourse. I wonder if, when one remembers or evokes such a composition, the nature of the memory is closer to a verbal formula than to an auditory sensation in the mind of the one remembering.

In another story from *El Aleph*, "Averroës's Search," Borges imagines the sage Averroës—at a time when the Iberian Peninsula was still called Al-Andalus—welcoming the merchant Al-Bucasim into his home in Cordova after the latter has returned from a long and fantastical journey. "What could he tell? Besides, they demanded wonders of him and marvels are perhaps incommunicable; the moon of Bengal is not the same as the moon of Yemen, but it may be described in the same words."[3] Here Borges poses questions about language and memory that are similar to those we are posing about language, sound, and memory. Think of the respective moons evoked in Debussy's "Clair de Lune" and Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*; though the same celestial body is referenced in both pieces, the aesthetic renditions are very different. Without listening to these compositions, however, one might think there is only "one moon" in both pieces of music. In other words, though the moons would not be confused by the ear of a listener, they might be confused by the mind of a rememberer.

The advantage of collapsing a sound event into a linguistic formula is that such an event might not actually involve sound as conventionally understood—i.e., the moon has no universal sound, just as La Monte Young's *Composition #5* (1960), whose score reads "Turn a butterfly (or any number of butterflies) loose in the performance area," produces (almost) no sound but forces us to imagine a sound beyond auditory perception. Lucier uses this very composition to distinguish between text scores that consist of instructions for realizing a composition (such as *I am sitting in a room*) and others "that simply present an idea, an interesting idea to think about."[4] This distinction may be valid when it comes to text scores, but it's less useful when examining how the thought or memory of such works may linger in the mind when they are realized.

Until now we have inquired about sound experiences that collapse into linguistic utterances in the context of interpersonal communication. It's also interesting when such a collapse occurs in the intimacy of a sound memory internal to and possessed by only one person. It's legitimate to ask to what extent, in order to remember something—in this case a sound—one must go through a mental description, conscious or not, that is made up of "words."

The Dark Realm of Pure Memory

Again in "The Immortal," Borges—a writer intimately aware of language's immense manipulative and ontologically hegemonic power—goes further in

sketching a world without memory, one that curiously resembles the dark realm of pure memory described by Henry Bergson. Borges writes: "I imagined a world without memory, without time; I toyed with the possibility of a language that had no nouns, a language of impersonal verbs or indeclinable adjectives. In these reflections many days went by, and with the days, years. Until one morning, something very much like joy occurred—the sky rained slow, strong rain."[5] The secant line that succeeds here in crossing the shadow zone of pure memory is emotion, in this case the joy of morning rain. Such emotions are impossible to measure except by what David Lapoujade calls the dark number of quality, a nonquantitative number peculiar to poetic images, evocative of a whole that is seemingly impossible to remember (infinite memory would be required), but which nonetheless is perhaps the only thing truly remembered.[6]

In the case of a sound memory, we also ask whether it's necessary to arrange the memory on the plot of linear time in order to perceive it, or whether it can be sensed instantaneously instead. Elsewhere I have suggested that while the sound recording presents itself as a powerful avatar of sound memory, reconstructing a sound memory from a recording forces us to unfold it in linear time, nailing us to a timeline, that is, to a spatial metaphor—what Bergson would call a " *mix mal analysé* " (poorly analyzed mix).[7] The recording does not capture the emotional secant, the dèjà vu that encapsulates a crystallized whole and allows us to instantly recall something that would otherwise have a linear duration extended over a time measurable in seconds, minutes, hours. How much of a piece like *I am sitting in a room* can we instantly recreate in memory without the aid of a recording? To what extent might such a memory resemble an aural perception—while not unfolding in linear time—rather than a mere verbal description, encoded in language out of time, of a virtual rather than actualized experience? To what extent should this recollection extend in the chronometric and linear time of brain activity?

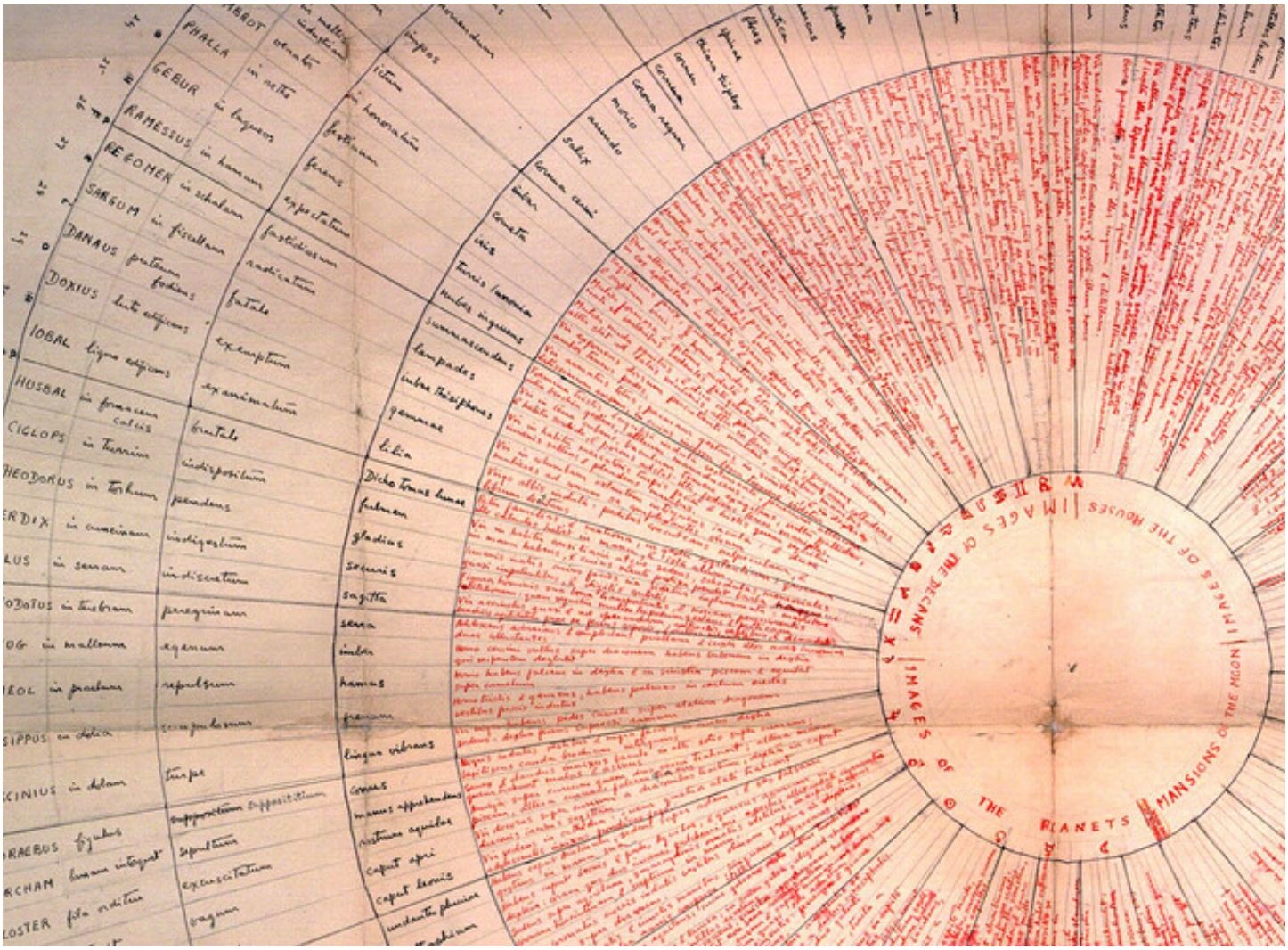
The recorded versions of *I am sitting in a room* that I know of range in duration from twenty-five minutes—from one of Lucier's last performances before his death in 2018—to forty-five minutes (1981).[8] Should the act of remembering these therefore last twenty-five and forty-five minutes? Or just one instant? Would it suffice to evoke the formula of *I am sitting in a room*, in the form of a brief synopsis, to retrieve these memories? A fictional ethnomusicologist created by the pen of Claudio Morandini tackles this dilemma. He discerns the deceptive and fallacious nature of sound recording, which is nonetheless intended as an honest receptacle for sound memory. Dependence on the metaphor equating sound memory and sound recording, however, is so strong that getting rid of it requires a feverish delirium:

> Some composers are known to be able to perform an entire piece note for note after listening to it only once. Well, I can do that too, recorder be damned. I'm listening: I'm gathering information, I'm visualizing notes on that series of staves that is my mind. In fact, I am not delirious at all, the fever that is plaguing me makes me perfectly lucid: I am nothing but a brain, I can perceive what others cannot even imagine exists. I transcribe into my memory an entire encyclopedia of songs, verses, calls, sobs, screams, and cries. I compose a symphony, indeed a cycle of symphonies, a twelve-hour oratorio, a four-day melodrama. And every sigh in this collective performance speaks to me, is endowed with meaning, as distinct as a syllable uttered by a good speaker on the radio.[9]

Whether the rememberer is delirious or not, memory seems to breathe, to oscillate between a linguistic compression of a few words (phrases folded in on themselves until they occupy very little space) and a perceptual decompression, in which pure memory, desiccated and shriveled like a dehydrated rag, rehydrates, reoccupying a volume and regaining form. In such an unfolding, it's hard for us to say how much of the regained form is an invention (or an accident) and how much is the faithful redrawing of the original outline. This is made even more difficult because that form is nothing but consciousness itself, and perhaps it's only within it that one can conceive of a recollection, avoiding the paradox of constant rebirth at every moment that would leave us amnesic and unconscious of our enduring in time.

Mix Mal Analysé

Bergson invites us to think of memory and time as detached from spatial and temporal metaphors. In being pure "duration," memory and time are outside linear time. Memory is eternal in the sense that it's neither prior nor posterior to the present, but coexists with it. Bergson's pure memory resembles the argument of the Greek theologian Irenaeus, from the second century CE, that eternity is outside the passage of time. Borges speaks at length about Irenaeus in his essay "A History of Eternity," and it's no coincidence that the protagonist of his 1942 short story "Funes the Memorious" is named after the theologian from antiquity. The case of Funes is extraordinary: ever since a fall as a young man, he has remembered *everything*. His consciousness has become infallible. For him, "the present was almost intolerable in its richness and sharpness, as were his most distant and trivial memories … We, at one glance, can perceive three glasses on a table; Funes, all the leaves and tendrils and fruit that make up a grape vine."[10] The narrator of the story tells us that because his memory is not as powerful as Funes's memory, the narration is nothing but a reminiscence. This reminiscence begins with a sonorous



Detail of Frances Yates's reconstruction of Giordano Bruno's memory wheel from De Umbris Idearum, 1582. Warburg Institute.

recollection of Funes's voice: "I clearly remember his voice: the slow, resentful, nasal voice of the old-time dweller of the suburbs, without the Italian sibilants we have today."[11]

How might Funes recollect a version of *I am sitting in a room* that he had heard? Ostensibly, it would last exactly as long as the performance itself; he would remember every detail, every accumulation of frequencies, every progressive increase in volume in a particular part of the spectrum, every individual appearance of some sonic reflection in some corner of the room. Funes's experience of the piece would be totalizing, suffocating—all the more so because a particular frequency does not appear at a precise moment but rather emerges progressively *dal niente* (out of nothing). Perhaps Funes's powerful memory is intolerable because, as Borges figures it, it is spatial and extended—a *mix mal analysé* . He remembers everything but not *the whole*, and is not able to sublimate such immensity into a set of emotions. As his memory takes up space, it ends up killing all feeling in him. The last line of the story tells us, coldly, that Funes died of lung congestion. But readers will have little doubt that it was the overflow of his outsized memory that killed him. Cognitive scientists might wonder, thinking of Funes, whether forgetting is purposefully undertaken by the brain to free up space and avoid existential asphyxiation.

I am inspired by this idea to propose a possibly impossible exercise in sound mnemonics: to imagine a potentiometer that, once a sound has been turned into a memory, adjusts its inner intensity and volume. At minimum, the potentiometer coincides with oblivion (the sound has been forgotten). At maximum, it coincides with an auditory hallucination (we are no longer able to tell whether it's an imaginary sound or really heard).

It's very interesting to listen to Borges speak in the recorded lectures that are online, because his blindness forced him to speak from memory. We sense how the subject matter has been prepared and a certain sequence of the talk is followed. However, he is also free to deviate

from the path slightly and make each memory come alive in a different way. We perceive a memory that is present, alive, active, and above all capable of synthesizing, of reducing complex feeling to a few concise sentences that project dazzling poetic images.

My memory is much less powerful than Borges's (not to mention Funes's). It's slippery, as crumbly as a downhill dirt road prone to landslides. Like many others I have a certain neurotic tic that makes me forget whether I really closed the front door when I left the house. I walk down the street and doubt assails me. I retrace my steps, I perform the same gesture cognitively, but my mind won't cooperate. I replay leaving the house, but once I reach the street in my mind, doubt appears. The memory of an imaginary or repeated past and the perception of the present become confused. It's not enough to utter the phrase "I locked the door," since I no longer know at what moment, on what day, in what life I did so. To listen to music or sound is already to remember, to perceive a change from within, to recognize the new as already past. Sound memory is present, alive, active, and above all capable of reducing a complex feeling to a crystallized whole.

Rendering Zahir

Lately I have listened repeatedly to *Rendering* (1989/90), a composition by Luciano Berio based on an unfinished work by Schubert. Where Schubert left empty spaces, Berio completes them in his own minimalist style. In Berio's version, a celesta (a keyboard similar in sound to a glockenspiel) announces the places in the composition where Schubert left caesuras. But when listening to *Rendering* it's nonetheless hard to discern where one composer leaves off and the other takes over. I have listened obsessively to the recording, searching for the moments of caesura. As with the house door, here too something magical distracts me at the very moment of transition: one moment we are in Schubert's world, the next in Berio's. But at what precise moment I cross this threshold, I cannot remember. Funes, on the other hand, would have no trouble remembering. But would he understand the music and enjoy it? Is unknowing part of the joy?

What makes *Rendering* into music is this elusive moment when things change, a moment that stubbornly eludes my memory. It's the opposite of what Borges describes in his short story "The Zahir": "Zahir in Arabic means 'notorious,' 'visible'; in this sense it is one of the ninety-nine names of God, and the people (in Muslim territories) use it to signify 'beings or things which possess the terrible property of being unforgettable, and whose image finally drives one mad.'"[12]

The moments in *Rendering* when the music changes from one composer to the other are in themselves unrememberable. Their fundamental property is decay. In a sense, all music struggles against the "Zahir," against the "property of being unforgettable." It does this by using a strategy described elsewhere in Borges's story: "The Sufis recite their own names, or the ninety-nine divine names, until they become meaningless. I long to travel that path. Perhaps I should conclude by wearing away the Zahir simply through thinking of it again and again."[13]

The obsessive repetition of the statement "I am sitting in a room" goes down the same path as the caesura moments in *Rendering*. They wear down the meaning of a remembered formula by using the repetition and redundancy of formants to turn it into something unique. Whether it succeeds is up for debate.

X

Alessandro Bosetti is a composer and sound artist with an interest in the musicality of spoken language and the relationship between sound and memory. Recent works include the voice archive *Plane Talea* (in progress), the radio performances *Je ne suis pas là pour parler* (2019) and *Consensus Partium* (2020), the cycle of compositions *Pièces à pédales* (2021), and the musical theater pieces *Journal de Bord* and *Portraits des Voix* with Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart (2018 and 2021). He has released numerous record on labels such as Xong, Kohlhaas, Errant Bodies Press, Holidays Records, Unsounds, and Monotype. His book *Thèses/Voix*, a collection of texts between theory, poetry, and score, was published in 2021 by Les presses du réel. He lives and works in Marseille, France.

1
Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (Dover, 2004).

2
"The Immortal," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (New Directions, 1964), 118.

3
"Averroës's Search," in *Labyrinths*, 151.

4
Lucier, interview with Matthieu Saladin, *La même et le different* (Éditions MF, 2023). My translation. A similar distinction is made by John Lely and James Saunders: "There are several kinds of verbal notations. There's the kind that gives more or less accurate instructions to the performers. Others are merely suggestive or poetic. They are often unperformable and merely present an idea to ponder." Lely and Saunders, *Word Events: Perspectives on Verbal Notation* (Continuum, 2012).

5
"The Immortal," in *The Aleph and Other Stories* (Penguin, 2004), 12.

6
Lapoujade, *Puissances du temps: Versions de Bergson* (Éditions de Minuit, 2010).

7
Cited in Gilles Deleuze, *Le Bergsonisme* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2004).

8
The 2018 version is available on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqpFRbVvciE . The 1981 version is on Lucier's record *I am sitting in a room*, Lovely Music, 1981.

9
Morandini, *Gli oscillanti* (Bompiani, 2019). My translation.

10
"Funes the Memorious," in *Labyrinths* , 63.

11
"Funes the Memorious," 59.

12
"The Zahir," in *Labyrinths*, 161.

13
"The Zahir," 164.

Ben Vida

Pages Full of Words

> My penchant has always been for words. I care about them and I want them to look good on paper before I sing them. A love song written down just doesn't look good to me.
>
> —Mark E Smith, *Jamming!*, no. 22 (November 1984)

In late 2023, as I was preparing the release of my piece *Vocal Trio* for Blume Editions, Daniel Muzyczuk got in touch about writing an essay for *e-flux journal* that focused on language, music, and text. *Vocal Trio* was my seventh project in ten years centered on the voice and the use of typographical scores; Daniel's invitation created a nice opportunity to revisit a few of these projects and to consider how my relationship to scoring with text has changed over the past decade.

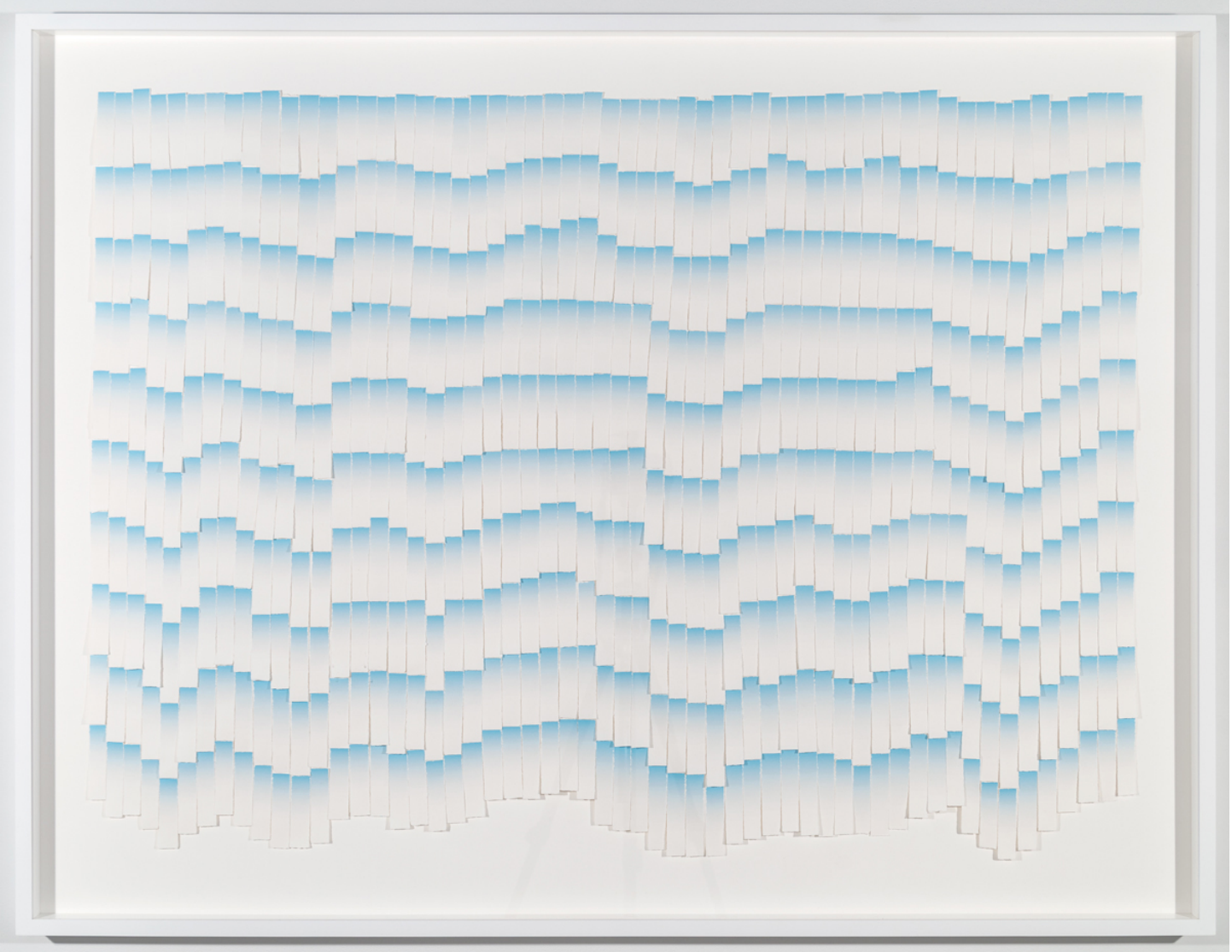
: voice as control source, 2012

The first text score I created came about because I was searching for a way of producing systems music that was more prone to failure. I was aiming to destabilize the rhythmic structures of my compositions and wanted to develop a method for generating patterns and phrases that bypassed the mechanical logic of the synthesizers I had been using. I felt the human voice was a perfect carrier for this failing stream of control data and the typographical score seemed like the most direct way to program for the voice.

The project I developed, *Slipping Control*, began as an investigation into voice-controlled synthesis, but soon evolved into an intermedia exhibition consisting of video, sculpture, print, and so on, where all the individual pieces produced would use the same initial textual materials as their starting point. I was thinking of this process as building a kind of generative soft system with a nice, wobbly human stage tucked into the control path. In terms of the voice, the only content it needed to carry was rhythm and pattern—nothing linguistic, just its non-semantic acoustic properties. Using simple phonetic language was perfect to communicate this information.

Creating streams of phonetic text felt almost like programming a drum machine—kick, snare, hi-hats, plosives for the drums, sibilance for the cymbals. I would sit and type out rhythms, watching the text form into repetitive patterns on the page. A few years later I would dig deeper into this mode of text programming to create a piece that utilized text-to-voice software, producing a sort of synthesized sound poetry, an uncanny and creepily hypnotic track called "Heteroglossic Riot."

As work on *Slipping Control* progressed, I invited Tyondai Braxton and Sara Magenheimer into my studio to



Ben Vida, Hand Torn Seconds (Blue), 2012.

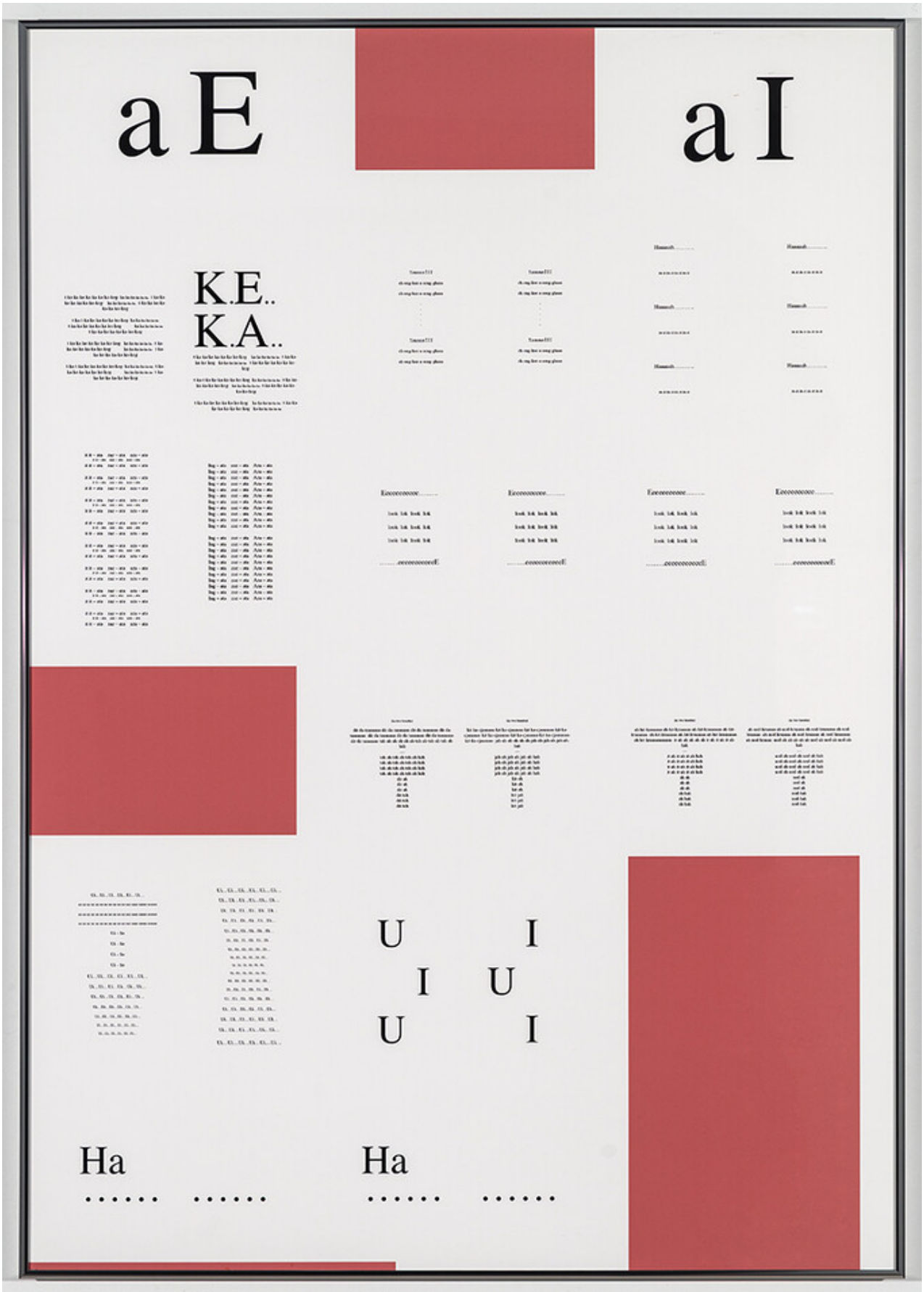
interpret the scores I had made. I gave them very little instruction and their performances were often significantly different from what I had been hearing in my head, yet each of their unique voicings of the text produced the desired effect of creating unstable rhythms. This was a big moment—to have a method of scoring that remained open enough to engage the creative intuition of my collaborators, but formal enough to elicit my desired compositional results.

Charting the evolution of these texts across mediums also proved informative. Watching how the function of the language changed as it traveled from the page to the video to the recording studio to the performance space was a way of testing the resilience of the text. One medium would inform the other, each creating another filter or sieve for the language to pass through. By the time I was performing this work live, the order of influence that the language had within the control paths had been totally inverted. The function of the score had come full circle and now needed to be reconsidered and reworked to serve in its next role.

: text as image, 2015

While I was working on *Slipping Control*, I started playing around with the compositional possibilities of using type as image. I began experimenting with a new set of pieces that blend the semantic, visual, and phonetic elements of language together to produce a kind of narrative concrete poetry—a collection of text drawings that could be nudged into the service of performance. I titled these works *Speech Acts.*

I was influenced by how the conceptual poets had demonstrated the mutability of digitized text; through their work, language became a ready-made that could be repurposed in much the same fashion as an audio sample.



Ben Vida, Tztztztzt I I I ... (Pink), 2013.

Once sound was fixed to the medium of tape it took on a new life as a sample, a sound object that could be processed and transformed. Extracted from its source, the sample created an opportunity for the composer to reassign its signifiers through sonic transformation and recontextualization. Digitalization expanded the malleability of this process exponentially, creating the possibility for a wild morphology.

Of course there is a history of "language as sample" that precedes conceptual poetry (the cut-up method, concrete poetry, the l=a=n=g=u=a=g=e writers' games and processes), but having the ability to copy the entirety of a digitized text in three keystrokes, to be able to push text around in a document as one would push around an audio clip in a DAW (digital audio workstation)—what a liberation!

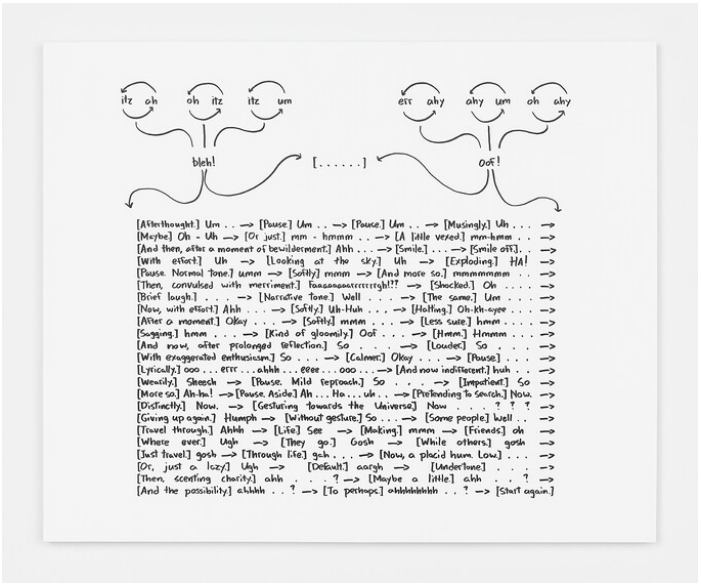
By decoupling phrases from their origin, my relationship to language went through the same recalibration as my relationship to music had when I first began listening to records in search of audio samples. Reading became a foraging expedition in which sentences or phrases might pop off the page, revealing in themselves the possibility of becoming the foundation for something altogether new.

I was also finding that syntactic forms could be repurposed as ready-made templates. Typographical layouts of preexisting texts could be emptied of their meaning and filled back in, Mad Libs style, with new content. Brackets, parentheses, dashes, quotation marks, ellipses, and punctuation, all informing the rhythm, accent, and contour of each new phrase, prompted a call and response or dialogue between what has been removed from the existing text and what remained.

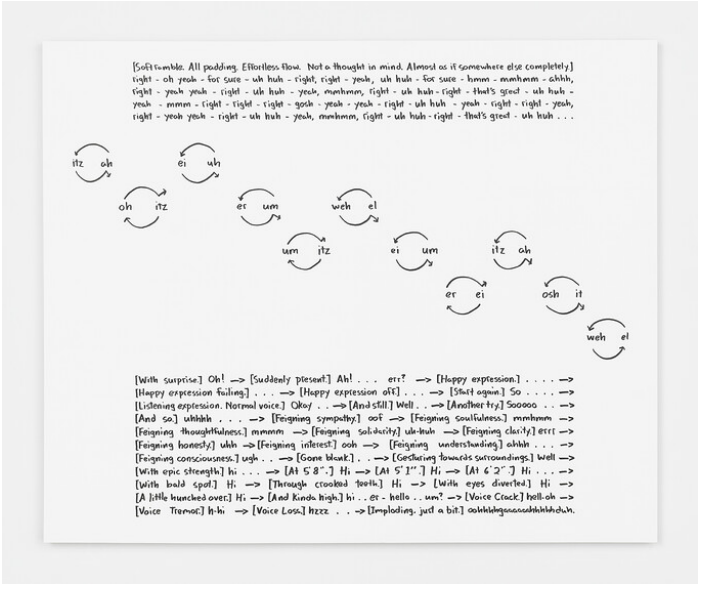
These procedural writing techniques proved to be both generative and playful. On the surface they could seem structuralist or coldly systematic but in practice they became a device for prompting a less self-conscious method of writing. By off-loading some of the basic structural elements of a text, I found the space to be more improvisational and looser with grammatical play. I liked that no specific outcome was sought in regard to plot or narrative—just the pleasure of discovery as words and phrases fell into place, revealing the form of each new work.

Graphic in their layout, opaque in their function, as scores, *Speech Acts* didn't necessarily communicate any specific manner of interpretation. As textual drawings it is hard to say if they pre-articulated any viable use as a performance tool at all, which made them fun to actually try to perform.

If on the page *Speech Acts* hinted at some sort of abstracted narrative, the live performances of these works, read by artist Mary Manning and myself, gave the impression of two spaced-out narrators stumbling through a dialogue of false starts, echoes, mimicries, and circuitous logics. Characters created out of a process are placed in a preexisting setting and talk in language borrowed from some other story. Their intertextual babble acts to create and obscure meaning moment by moment; the narrators seem to want to tell a story but are not quite able to figure out how to start.



Ben Vida, Speech Acts, 2015.



Ben Vida, Speech Acts, 2015.

: typographical road maps for group improvisations, 2018

Having produced two sets of typographical scores devised within a visual arts context, I shifted my focus back to live performance with my piece *Reducing the Tempo to Zero*. This was a durational work scored for fixed electronics and vocal ensemble and presented as a six-hour-long concert.

In 2010 I attended a performance of Morton Feldman's *String Quartet No. 2* at ISSUE Project Room in Brooklyn and was inspired by how that work utilized extended performance length to explore ideas around memory, absorption, and attention.

Around that time, I'd also been visiting La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's Dream House and attending Phill Niblock's solstice performances; all of these experiences helped to evolve my understanding of compositional form in regard to duration. I wanted to use installation, staging, and site specificity as elemental compositional building blocks to create a performance that oscillated between sound installation and concert, where both the audience and the performers might begin to understand the "now" as an ever-changing point of multiple durations and potentialities. Ultimately, I wanted to see if it was possible to shift our perception of time from the linear to the spatial.

The mechanics behind these performances were simple: a lot of time was going to pass—up to six hours—and we, the vocalists, were going to be there for all of it, singing and breathing in unison, enveloped by the drones of the fixed backing track and navigating the emotions of engaging in something that is demanding both in focus and physicality. It was fun! … and also, kind of brutal. It was a lot of things at once, and that was the point. Anyone who has performed durational work will tell you that time's elasticity is put into high relief when on the stage, and this experience can deeply imprint in you a new understanding of the possibilities of temporal slippage.

I composed the *Reducing the Tempo to Zero* scores using phonetic language much in the same style as I had with *Slipping Control*. I was interested in vocal disfluencies and the cadence of speech patterns that become stuck. I felt that this linguistic noise that obscures the speech signal could be emphasized and used as the main verbal material of a score; all of the "uhs" and "ums" were organized into nonsensical rhythmic conversation.

The texts I composed helped guide the singers through the long performance and determined the materials and trajectories of our improvisations. I knew that an important aspect of these scores would be that they not completely short circuit what the vocalists might be inspired to do intuitively. A certain amount of open-endedness was needed, and again the use of phonetic language served to communicate just enough information to keep us all relatively in sync but left space for the vocalists to express themselves and expand the timbre and feel of the group's accumulative voice.

These concerts were intense—to sit together and sing for that duration of time, to experience our voices and breathing come together and break apart, to feel one's attention drift and return. At each performance I learned something new. By the end of this project, I came to realize that I had created more of a momentary social construct that could fast-forward intimacy than a finely tuned musical composition—and that was interesting! I had inadvertently created a framework for spending time with people, sitting together, singing in unison, tuning our voices, and thus listening and adjusting to one another. We got into a shared rhythm and feel and engaged in the act of communal concentration.

: the gathering and summing of ambient language, 2020

My first vocal work that included an acoustic ensemble and that called for the use of traditional notation was *The Beat My Head Hit,* written for Yarn/Wire and Nina Dante. I started composing this piece by writing and arranging all of the text. I wanted the formal compositional considerations to be determined by the language and the systems I had developed to organize that language. Which is to say, the composition had to work purely as a text piece first, and from there I could begin composing the music. I did end up producing a notated score for Yarn/Wire but once we started rehearsing, we quickly discarded my many superfluous pages and simply returned to the text, adding just a minimal number of notated cells in the margins of the typographical score. We all understood that the form of this work was in the language, so why not use that as the guide to navigate the piece?

At the time I started work on this project I had been living in New York for almost ten years and had found myself in the habit of tuning into and writing down the ambient language of my surroundings. This sounds like habitual aestheticized eavesdropping, but I think it was actually an attempt at keeping field notes in the hope of capturing an impression of the verbal and textual environment I was living in.

I had been thinking about the Burroughs/Gysin cut-up method and had started to see it as a way to subtly conjure phrases from the atmosphere—a process for summing disparate inputs and then outputting them as a single stream of information. I kept imagining a ring-modulator circuit with the objective ambient language acting as the input signal, my own subjective filtering as the carrier signal, and the resulting combination of these two sources as the final output.

We are always making sense of so much language, text, image, sound. The past/future/present are always there; our attention goes multidimensional and seems to

Ben Vida, from a performance of Reducing the Tempo to Zero, Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato, Italy, 2016.

rhizomatically mutate. So much accumulation, so much to parse, so much to try to figure out. I wanted to capture this fragmented density on the page to see what new information might resonate up and out of it, see what new impressionistic stories might be hiding in that flux.

While finishing production on the *Speech Acts* exhibition I came across an edition of John Cage's *Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)*. Cage's ability to flatten his personal interests, correspondences, the daily news, passing conversations, recollections, and storytelling into a single linear stream of text produced the effect of an abstracted memoir. Each entry at once comprises memories/forethoughts/aspirations; an ecology and an ambience arise out of a pool of collected phrases. I could see in this process a method of writing that puts an artist in conversation with their surrounding accumulative ambient language and text—a generative practice of foraging and responding, editing and rewriting.

Both Cage's diary and Andy Warhol's are an accumulation of seemingly impersonal details that, in their density, start to reveal the dimensions of each artist's individual worlds (and worldviews). This feels true of David Markson's novels and the language that adds voice to Raymond Pettibon's drawings. The origin of the text in these works is of less importance than the resulting imaginative space produced through the collecting and organizing of disparate thoughts into a new form.

The fragmented syntax of *The Beat My Head Hit* hints at a narrative but leaves the most foundational elements up to the listener to fill in. For me this has something in common with how a spectral composer will build a whole harmonic language off of the partials of a single pitch but suspend the use of that pitch's fundamental, creating a logic to the dissonance that encourages the listener's ear to fill in that missing harmonic information . I am beginning to see these texts I create as a kind of textual spectralism, a script that is filled with the higher harmonics and partials but leaves the fundamental aspects of the text open for any listener's imagined plot.

: words as filters, 2022

In spring 2022 I was in Bremen, Germany working with the choreographer Faye Driscoll. Inspired by her method of

Ben Vida with Yarn/Wire and Nina Dante, from a performance of The Beat My Head Hit, ISSUE Project Room, Brooklyn, New York, 2020.

slowly developing a piece through rehearsal and having daily access to a spacious, interesting-sounding rehearsal space, I started to meet with two of the vocalists from the dance company to work out some ideas. It was a casual and exploratory situation. To create a bit of form for the three of us, I wrote out a page of text to set some parameters and to help guide our improvisations. With this and a few simple spoken instructions (favor 2nds and 7ths over 3rds, consider texture as much as pitch, and so on) we started to discover, in process, the dimensions of a new composition, and in time arrived at a performance of the piece that would become *Vocal Trio*.

Having spent the previous few years working on *The Beat My Head Hit*, for *Vocal Trio* I was happy to use language as a less concrete and meaning-rich compositional material. As Amy Gernux, Lotte Rudhart, and I started to sing together, I began hearing in the blend of our voices something related to additive and subtractive synthesis. In those techniques, complex sounds are created through the combining of synthesized voices, and then these sounds are carved back into by filtering out harmonic information. If the quality of the phonetic language in *Slipping Control* functioned to create amplitude envelopes approximating rhythmic patterns, the language used for the *Vocal Trio* score determined the mouth shapes that would articulate the timbral shifts of the pitches we were voicing. We called this "Slow Singing." We were stretching out the pronunciations of the words to such an extent that their meaning completely dissolved and all we were left with was sound, pitch, tone, and texture.

I recently came across Joan La Barbara's description of her first time working with Alvin Lucier. It felt so familiar to what I had just discovered by working with Amy and Lotte:

> The first work I performed with composer Alvin Lucier, *Still and Moving Lines of Silence in Families of Hyperbolas*, is enigmatic. We rehearsed in the Merce Cunningham studio at Westbeth in 1972. Lucier explained that he would play sine tones from four audio speakers placed at the edges of the "stage" and that I was free to "play" within the situation. I moved onto the dance floor, closed my eyes, and continued moving until I felt I was in my acoustical center within the space, being "bombarded" equally

> by the sounds, and then began singing softly, matching exactly the pitch of the sine tones. I then began to move my pitch microtonally away from the unison, causing the waves to move away from me. I played with this situation for some twenty minutes, and then stopped and returned to where Lucier was seated. "Tell me what you were doing," Alvin said. I explained, and he replied, "That's the piece."[1]

Creating *Vocal Trio* was much like this: a process of listening and refining that helped us to understand what the piece was simply through the act of the three of us spending time together hanging out and singing. And though this work was informed by my one page of words and the collaborative process of discovering our singing style, the final compositional form was only set once we hit record and sang through the piece together. In performing it we finished the composition.

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> The experience of hearing an opera is that you accumulate a lot of details that are not very significant in themselves. No one of the details in an opera (or in a novel) is a mind-boggling detail. But things just keep coming until you have a huge pile of them. That's when they start meaning something.
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> —Robert Ashley, lecture at Mills College, 1989

I like the matter-of-factness of Ashley talking about his opera *Perfect Lives.* It resonates with how I've been thinking about using atmospheric language to create expanded narratives or large-scale assemblages. I, too, might use generative writing techniques to add details to the "huge pile," letting meaning arise out of the accumulation.

In 2008 I got to see three of Ashley's later operas performed at La Mama in New York. Needless to say, it left a deep impression. I like reading through Ashley's scores; I like looking at them as images. You can see the formal considerations of his pieces on the page, in the typography, and in the language and phrasing. When seeing them performed live—all that density of language, the length of the phrases determining tempo, the chorus of voices slipping between the textural and the textual, the performers seated, turning page after page after page—a complexity of form is revealed that the page only hints at.

As you spend time with Ashley's work the unique compositional possibilities of the typographical score come into focus. More than a memory device or a set of instructions, in his scores you see the potentiality of language as sound, text as image, and narrative as space. On the page is a proposition for a spatialized intertextual mode of storytelling, one that holds so many ideas and can generate so many more.

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Ben Vida is a composer, improviser, writer, and artist. His practice encompasses works for voice and ensemble, musique concrète, text-based compositions, and electro-acoustic improvisation. In the mid-1990s he was involved in Chicago's multi-faceted experimental music scene, co-founding the quartet Town & Country. In the mid-2000s he relocated to New York and began producing electronic and systems-based compositions that focused on psychoacoustics and advanced synthesis techniques, releasing records on Shelter Press and PAN. He also began exhibiting artworks in various media including video, text drawing, and sound installation. Since 2013, he has been composing pieces that combine his interests in group vocalization, durational performance, and typographical scores. He teaches in the Sonic Arts MFA at Brooklyn College.

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Joan La Barbara, foreword to *On Minimalism,* ed. by Kerry O'Brien and William Robin (University of California Press, 2023), xiii.

Andrius Arutiunian

Synthetic Exercises

In the late 1980s a former classical flute student, Andy Hildebrand, changes his career path and moves on to study advanced digital signal processing. Having become a specialist in stochastic estimation theory (and by now a doctor), Hildebrand starts working for Exxon, one of the world's largest oil and gas companies. There he develops a very idiosyncratic solution to the one simple question that the corporation asks him—where is the oil? Hildebrand develops a program to process data from reflection seismology, using seismic waves to locate hidden gas and oil sources. By sending sonic signals into the earth and using advanced algorithms to correlate and predict (in other words, attune the data), Dr. Hildebrand could finally locate the oil as if by magic.

Around ten years later a small US-based software company called Silent Talker begins developing an algorithm to detect micro-facial expressions. Through the decades that follow the company becomes the world-leading developer of automated deception recognition systems, or put simply, algorithmic lie detectors. Then a few former employees come up with their own version of the software, which they call "iBorderCtrl." Developed with the border patrols of Spain, Greece, and the UK, this software was commissioned and funded through the European Union's Horizon 2020 program. The algorithm scans the facial micro-expressions of migrants and asylum seekers entering the EU and, based on their facial movements, determines their level of veracity—essentially whether they are "lying" or not.

One day over dinner Dr. Hildebrand is jokingly challenged by a friend to "invent something." The friend then proceeds to suggest that Andy invent something that makes him sing in tune. It dawns on Dr. Hildebrand that the technologies of oil extraction and voice tuning have a lot in common—correlation (statics determination), linear predictive coding (deconvolution), synthesis (forward modeling), and formant analysis (spectral enhancement).

He rushes home and soon after patents a new technology called "Auto-Tune," a software to automatically tune the human voice in an organic and imperceptible manner. This software becomes the dream tool of music studios and singers, as it eliminates the possibility of notes going out of tune ever again. The algorithm becomes a dirty secret of the music industry, as nobody publicly admits using it until the 1998 pop hit "Believe" by Cher. The song uses the now-ubiquitous auto-tuning sound effect—its first massive recognition and commercial success.

Having no scientifically reasonable way to train their algorithm in the art of lying, the iBorderCtrl team trained it using thirty-two hired actors, who simulated deceptive and truthful situations in a lab setting. This data was then used to train the algorithm to determine whether migrant are being deceitful about their intentions for entering the EU.

Andrius Arutiunian, Synthetic Exercises, installation, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

Synthetic Exercises uses a sound library I compiled while working on another piece for which I subverted and retrained the iBorderCtrl algorithm. In *Synthetic Exercises*, this library, which was used to train the algorithm to "vocalize" the data, became my main point of fascination. As I trained the algorithm, it started spitting out early, noisy variants—not quite the human voice, not quite the finished sonority either. It produced a library of its own—artefacts, vocal errors, and sonic by-products, all documenting the birth of a particular digital vocalization. *Synthetic Exercises* is an arrangement of these sonic events, rendered heavily through auto-tune, exercising speech without words.

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Andrius Arutiunian is an Armenian-Lithuanian artist and composer exploring sonic dissent, aural cosmologies, and vernacular histories. His research experiments with speculative instruments, non-Western knowledges, and alternate methods for world-ordering. Through playful investigation of hypnotic and enigmatic forms, his installations, films, and performances challenge the concepts of musical and political attunement.