

moments of air

catherine lamb

She continues to sweep all day,
moving a tower,

the empty space, and the mass of it
when it moves in this way.

There is a crease in the top layer

breaking apart,

(a spore lands again).

The world is contained---
in the manner in which it contaminates

the air,
opening.

A young boy is standing outside his family's house with a large, clear plastic garbage bag in his hands, across the street from the window where I work. The night before they had a gathering and he is about to pick up the empty bottles in the front yard. As he lifts the bag and opens it, it catches wind. Now he is holding, out in front of him, an enormous, cylindrical, shimmering wind-sock, larger than his body. He has his arms outstretched for many minutes; watching the object's movements and form. He holds it above him-- very slowly pulling it down until he is surrounded by it. The wind blows against the walls of the object, making it collapse against his own form.

In this moment, my neighbor across the street has become the world. He has, you could say, invited it in and become fully absorbed by it (as I am watching his intent and decision with the object and the air.)

The manner in which the composer, the performer, and the audience listens is in proportion to the world and its existence. That a musical experience can be so vast in its differentiation from being to being has everything to do with how one listens. That a repetition (as in memory to past experience) is of consequence to one's own sensations. Any listener's intent and experience with a piece of music has as much inference and importance as the inception of the original, because it is belonging to the world.

A being has a choice in the matter when it comes to hearing music. At any given moment, an individual can choose to listen in whatever space of intent one can allow for. Or, one can allow for the ethereal...for sound to float in the air as a manner to focus on something else in that moment, (as background or entertainment).

There is a continuous composition in the Gold Line train running from

downtown Los Angeles to Pasadena. It is more apparent in particular cars. I wrote down the number of the last car I experienced it in-- #5336. The composition is a kind of ostinato figure, beginning around an F below middle C. There are three pure tones in the area where the two cars meet. They move step-ward, staggering with a sort of lilting consistency, you could call it a sort of rubato pattern reiterated. It reminds me of Debussy's *Des Pas Sur La Neige* from his *Piano Preludes*, except the second tone sort of sits atop the first just so, a narrow minor second. The tones overlap for a moment and then hold their own. The third tone comes in, always unpredictably, yet when it has arrived you realize it has been precisely placed, and creates a settlement. It seems to be a 7:6 minor third from the first tone at its most stable point, yet mostly it wavers. The tones move in this sequence, overlapping, overtaking, never forced. When I hear this movement (in particularly rare cars and on rare days it consumes me) I am overcome with the need to burst into tears and often I miss my intended stop. Perhaps it is the moment its presence emerges from the sound of the brakes, the fragility from which the tones are breaking apart.

If you are looking at layers upon layers of white paint on a rough wall you can still see the texture beneath, and when the sun hits the paint enough, even when it is muddled, all the colors you could ever hope for are there-- (This is as you or I may hear a tone.) A tone's sustain (as bow on string), its presence, contains absolute chaos. In the adding of another tone, that chaos in the singularity breaks away and we are then made to focus on the affect of two tones in their fusion (if allowed to continue its sustain). We may discern their beating quality, their sub-harmonic and overtone spectrums combined, a tone appearing up high or down low as the difference between the two equate. The space in which two tones inhabit is infinite and frightening. In adding a third tone, a chord stabilizes. A lengthened lyricism opens up the spectrum, rather than suggesting continuity of line as in a phrase. Lyricism reforms into new principle, and the elapsing of sound moves with the world.

And as we imagine the singularity and then the fusing of tones, the world is present. An intended sound coexists with the world, (its cooling air systems, its thunders, its streets, and its birds.) One could say, for instance, that John Cage's *4'33* is the world itself. And from this, one is opened to listening more intently.

I remember when I was studying music in India and met regularly with a violinist there. One day she was showing me a composition. I remember wanting to focus my attention on a particular aspect of its sound, asking whether it would be alright if I were to alter it slightly. She became furious and asked whether I thought I was God, and how could I think of myself as higher than the music itself? I later came to understand that she was participating in Deleuze's theory on the need for repetition in society, as a "moral dilemma". The need for something "good" to be repeated over and over again. (much like the need to practice a scale correctly, over and over again)

I later met Mani Kaul, who introduced me to Dhrupad music, which makes a point that you may reiterate something a thousand times and never repeat it. To me, this dissolves the feeling of ownership (as it is

constantly shifting), and makes an intent that of the world.

"Eternal return cannot mean the return of the Identical because it presupposes a world (that of the will to power) in which all previous identities have been abolished and dissolved. Returning is being, but only the being of becoming..." Gilles Deleuze, from *Difference & Repetition*

Because of the world, I cannot call the train engineer the composer of the piece that occurs in car #5336 of the Gold Line. Any piece of music I have ever loved belongs to no single being. Works of such composers as Debussy, Satie, Cage, Feldman, Young, Scelsi, Tenney, Radique, Lucier, Nakamura, Palestine, Pizaro, Frey, Slavniks, and Oliveros (to name such a few) have all taught me about the intention of listening. Their work is of a collection of the world that is in portion to the conscience of my generation of musicians in Los Angeles. And yet, their work is in the air. One may own an intent, but one may not own an object. A piece of music is of the world.

Christian Wolff made a point that in the act of the creation of a score, one should examine what "misinterpretations" would make the piece differ too greatly from the composer's intent and to make those portions as clear as possible (as to guide the performer towards its original form). My friends and I have heard recordings of his music in which we wonder whether or not the performance would be to his liking. I believe that he would take a stance that it has no matter as to whether he *likes* (asthetically or otherwise) particular interpretations of his scores or not, but that whether the performer(s) followed the score. In this aspect, (radically, politically, or, rather humbly) allowing a score to be the world itself.

As an object contains matter belonging to the world, a score is clearly of a composer's intent, yet belonging to the world.

I am thinking of Eva Hesse's sculptures and the continual alteration of their forms. Her works with latex were glowing, smooth, weightless...now discoloring, drooping and cracking. Her original intent is still there although the forms are clearly changing, (the moment they became the world).

"Objects contain the possibility of all situations." Ludwig Wittgenstein, from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* line 2.014

I remember listening to an interview with Terry Riley documented from the early 1980s. He was explaining that to him, the mark of a good performance is when you are unaware of the performer or the composer, but only the music. That when one walks away from it, one walks away with an experience in the world. There is no sense of the physical nature of the performer perhaps, the athleticism it took to execute. Perhaps there is no feeling of being "impressed" at all, but that the listener was allowed (or allowed themselves) to be changed.

As a composer of music, I have the need to remind myself over and over again that my control lies in what I am (unearthing). I can envision a clear function, a clear feeling, a clear visual form to the work. As it sits in the world, I can imagine its performance--how the performers will feel

playing, whether or not they will feel comfortable, bored, excited, pleased, or scared. There is this awareness and then allowing it to be the world. We can only envision, let go, imagine, let go, create, let go, unearth, let go. Once we let the objects go, they are the air.

The first time I listen to a piece of mine being performed I usually experience something similar, and it usually relates to the utter feeling of horror. I often wonder what sort of beast I have released into the world. It is the feeling of lack of control---the recognition that the work is its own creature, somewhere from a portion of me, yet disconnected and belonging to the world. It just *is*, and there is an actuality that there is nothing I can do about its presence. That others have intentions of their own *must* be accepted. We can hold aesthetics and principles very dear and hope that there is an engagement with them. We hope that another will understand our intentions. Mostly, I have come to realize that what makes a performance "good" is whether or not the performer had an intention, like my neighbor across the street.

I now look forward to the horror feeling. If it is not there, then perhaps my intent has created something predictable or contained. If I were content as it were, feeling as though the piece were truly mine in the listening, that everything had gone as planned, what would I be containing? An intent in the world lives in its quiet yet persistent presence, and is unique to each individual.

and what is containment?

James Tenney wrote *Koan for String Quartet* after mulling over the effect of his postal piece for solo violin. The form emerged for him from the manifestation of *Koan*. Something must have occurred to him one day, and he figured out its harmonic structure (with root movement in the cello). The piece is released to the air in its precision of performers playing in tune, (becomes something like a barber shop quartet). Yet, there is something about the piece that becomes so unfathomably superhuman. I can not think of the lovely man who wrote it, only the world of sounds that occur from the functionality of its performance--the sounds overwhelming. Because of its precipitation of acts, (and much like the experience in car #5336), I am usually left with tears. Although my intent for listening (to the same recording, over again) changes (thus the piece changes), I am continuously struck by its form.

Friend Tashi Wada has numerous pieces involving two violinists playing "as slowly as possible" a descending glissando down the length of the G-string. Each piece is entirely different as the intent changes. I am thinking of *Duet*, *Revision* which involves the intent of the two musicians as they coexist (playing essentially in the same rate of motion and tone, descending, together.) There is a stunning, slow wave of moving partials and spectrum as the two are adjusting. The instructions read,

"The players descend as slowly as possible always maintaining their present relationship, which varies from moment to moment."

The two performers are focusing on their differences (when attempting to play in unison). In this way, the piece becomes entirely centered on the intent of the two listening.

Pauline Oliveros and many others have written about experiences listening (deeply) to various machinery and other sounds in the world. Morton Feldman once stated that there are no composers, only listeners.

"Careful listening is more important than making sounds happen."
Alvin Lucier

My generation follows this collective awareness of how one is able to be in the world with sound. We are left with our own individual intentions.

I vividly remember walking with a friend out in the bird estuaries/sanctuaries in the Puget Sound. We both watched as an enormous flock of dark brown-feathered birds were passing in front of us. Suddenly, the entire flock turned white as they had in that very moment, all decided to change direction and we were left looking at their downy bellies.

"It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists." Ludwig Wittgenstein, from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* line 6.44