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THE THIRTIETH ISSUE

STATE OF THE JOURNAL

Nate Wooley

Confronting the unknown is a nonnegotiable part of living. Wading into unchartered existential waters is as natural and necessary as eating, drinking, breathing. ~~But the~~ mysteries of life take on different hues depending on our age, maturity, and security. I, for example, am being colored by the anxiety surrounding my mid-life. After the most recent issue of *Sound American*, I felt drained and allowed myself to give in to doubts. These doubts included, among other things, the future of this project. I find myself now, with apologies to St. John of the Cross, in an gently unnerving "dark night of the soul."

The particulars of this affliction are not important, because they are not special. What I am experiencing is nothing more or less extreme than what anyone else will confront; the years ahead are shorter than those behind, and you question whether ~~what~~ your mind has done anything for your heart, or your soul. In my case, I wonder if the headlong dash toward documentation and proliferation ~~is as important as~~ time with the people I care about. Your anxiety may end up being different. I hope to hear about it some day and share our experience. This desire to know what shape each person's unknown and how it manifests in what they give the world has been a lifelong interest, and it has ended up being the central idea for *SA30*. I want to use this anniversary issue, selfishly, as an excuse to talk about our unavoidable self-doubt under the guise of *how* we work and what it means to question *why* we work.

This issue is made up of interviews ~~based roughly~~ around three questions:

1 How do you like to work?
2 Are you ever unsure?
3 How do you hope your life will develop?

As one would expect, the answers differ based on the interviewee's demeanor, way of communicating, age, and creative milieu. And this is the point, or perhaps hope, of the exercise. Diversity is the key to survival, but consistent variation also leads to entropy. A fine balance must be maintained, and I was pleased to find that this issue contains approaches to the creative life that are heterogeneous while adhering to three basic principles or correlations. No two people here have found their way to—or managed to live—the same creative life. This initial correlation is a negative one: a shared awareness that there is no textbook for the professional artist.

The second is a simple existential truth: What we experience in our past—and how we address it—changes the way we

interact with the world around us and how we shape a hopeful future. It's a simple matter of time's inescapable linear movement dragging our history along in a wake that somehow disrupts our future. I end each interview with a mental game of sorts by asking the subject for a prediction of their life—psychic, cultural, creative, economic—in thirty years. The question is ridiculous, but there are clues to the pervasiveness of experience in each interviewee's answers. Someone who has not had enough time for themselves may hope for a future where they can do as they please. Another may hope for larger institutional change after feeling subject to inequities. Yet another may be completely at peace with their past and present, and so they offer the pragmatic answer that they'll probably be dead. ~~Through~~ the same question, we can begin to see how shared principles such as time and experience can produce distinct responses.

In the same vein, the reproduced act of interviewing different subjects leads to a proliferation of ideas. The third principle is how much each individual shows of themselves and their aesthetics in the way they answer such similar questions. This may be done obviously, as in the poetic tempo and rhythm of Eileen Myles's response, or it may appear as a general wonder and positivity (Pickowicz) or a matter-of-fact demeanor (Oehlen). These are people used to communicating large ideas in a unique way, and it shows itself even in ~~the way the~~ speak or write about their work and life.

Throughout the issue's many interviews, (including an excerpt of the epic conversation between twentieth-century percussion icon Michael Ranta, composer Sarah Hennies, and Swiss artist and composer Vincent de Roguin) the reader can be drawn to—and subsumed in—the waves of sameness and difference that ebb and flow throughout. Large similarities make themselves visible, while each artist's answers show a slightly different way of looking at life, art, and survival. Given my recent bout of the unknown, this is what I was hoping for: not the answer to life, but the warmth of knowing everyone experiences it. In other words, everyone is dealing with life, but not all in the same way. This has been the ~~true~~ mission of *SA* to present the great and beautiful shagginess of living a life through the ~~eyes~~ of people who have made it their business to deliver their particular mess to the world in an interesting package.

Sound American began with a conversation with Lisa Kahlden, my boss, about the need for music writing that combined the contemporaneous quality of commercial music magazines with the rigor of academic research while definitively being neither. The obvious solution, to me, was to prioritize the voice of the artist as the primary, and best, source of information about music. Before I realized what I was getting myself into, Lisa had offered me the fifteen dollars a month to set up a web domain and build the online version of *Sound American*.

SA's first issue went live in 2014. It was a small affair consisting of an essay on gospel music donated by novelist Rick Moody, an interview with archivist, artist, and musician Ben Hall, and a short piece of mine on the psychology of collecting. The rest of the issue was padded with music and images of gospel record covers. I designed the whole site using a Square Space-knock-off site builder before releasing it to a very small, but immediately enthusiastic, readership.

Every issue that followed represented something new. *SA3: The John Cage Issue* was the first to concentrate on a single musical voice, homing in on the composer's *Number Pieces* and *Song Books* ~~as seen~~ through the lens of performance practice. It downplayed the mythology around Cage and promoted the role and process of the interpreter. This ~~is~~ ~~has become~~ an unspoken editorial direction for later composer-portrait issues on Anthony Braxton, Éliane Radigue, and Roscoe Mitchell, among others.

SA5: The Philadelphia Issue was the journal's first real miss, an uneven and naively researched issue that holds value as a source of information about the incredible, and still underappreciated, artists it featured. But its scattershot approach feels like an attempt to define a city by a few pages randomly torn out of a phonebook. I had been offered—and had taken—funding for this issue, and its inconsistent results informed another editorial decision to keep future issues clear of outside influences, economic or otherwise, for the sake of equanimity and quality. This decision has proved to be the most difficult and necessary as *SA* has grown.

Our most controversial issue remains *SA8: The What Is Jazz Issue*. Originally conceived as a social and linguistic experiment, I asked over fifty musicians worldwide to define the word "jazz" in a positive and negative sense: "What must be present to make music jazz?" and "What cannot be present for the music to be jazz?" The answers remain fascinating, but the response from the journal's growing audience has been even more telling; even now, the conversation (to use a po-

lite term) over not just the question, but its methodology, has prompted a lot of passionate opinions and, hopefully, constructive arguments.

After a few years, the journal found its way into a predictable, if not easy, rhythm. There were hits and misses as before, but the general level of quality improved (although my ability to design websites did not). *SA12: The Treatise Issue* marked the first time we commissioned groups of artists to record for an issue. (*SA3* had many commissioned versions of Cage's *Song Books*, but they were, for the most part, solo recordings without commentary.) Groups—both existing and ad hoc—were asked not only to record a pass of the same page of Cornelius Cardew's iconic graphic score, but to leave the tape running and let the readers/listeners in on their discussions as they navigated its abstract figures. This was the first in-depth taste of the creative process featured in *SA*, and it has remained a touchstone in the journal's attempt to show not only the end result of a recorded musical document, but the social and personal effort behind it.

SA16: The Anthony Braxton Issue was the first to receive real attention from outside the website's small, but loyal, readership. Even though it contains no direct communication with its subject, the issue draws an accurate map of Braxton's complex, modular universe, giving the reader an insight to compositional, musical, and anecdotal knowledge that had been reserved in the past only for those that played with him. Our seventeenth issue was the first to be guest curated. A group effort by the European publishing, composition, and conceptual group, Mumei, this issue is perhaps our most daring in the laying out of abstract ideas. The decision to give over every third issue to a guest curator remains controversial, but they provide our readers access to voices they wouldn't easily come across, and therefore I count it as one of the great advancements of the publication.

Sound American reached a crisis around the twenty-issue mark. I was tapped out as the sole editorial voice. The publication was hitting a writing, editing, and production wall, and I had to ask myself if it could continue in its current state as a haphazard, but decent, blog, or if I wanted to put the energy into making it something more. Was twenty the nice, round number to end on? Maybe not.

In choosing to continue, the first question to answer was how to revitalize the journal's topics and contributors. I had exhausted my resources, and so an editorial and advisory board was assembled to help guide future issues. I am so thankful

to those that signed on for the yearly meetings for their acknowledgment of successes, and for their challenges to ideas that may have gone astray. With the addition of the boards came the decision to release future issues in print as well as maintaining their presence for free on the website. Thankfully, *Sound American* found Mike Dyer around this time. His design help has been invaluable in making each issue its own visual event, and I consider him as much a creator of *Sound American* as I am at this point. His style guide was also used by Jason Loeffler to create a much better (finally) website experience.

The simultaneous production of print and online versions of the journal posed a fairly steep learning curve for me, but I am deeply proud of the ten issues that have been printed and released since then: *SA24: The Sun Ra Issue* was our first sell out, and the first to get media attention. It was also the first issue to come out during the pandemic, and its release will always be tied with the memory of sneaking into our locked office building at 6:00 AM to receive the shipment and maniacally fill orders in full mask. *SA25: The Folk Issue* was our first guest-curated issue to sell out and remains one of our most requested items. Sarah Hennies and Anna Roberts-Gevalt put together a beautifully loose and conversational set of articles around experimental and folk traditions all while dealing with illness and the depth of COVID uncertainty.

SA26: The OCCAM Ocean Issue is the most intimate issue for me. Another pandemic project, I talked to fellow performers of Éliane Radigue's music about their experiences and was able to share their responses with an audience that had no way to look in on such a personal and private process. It remains the issue that has gotten the closest to ~~the~~ vague notion of what *Sound American* can do to demystify and humanize the creative act. And finally, our last issue, *SA29: The Roscoe Mitchell Issue*, came as a shock to all of us when it sold out before we had even received our much expanded print run. Knowing that so many people wanted to find out more about an American legend of improvisation, conception, and composition gives a little hope about the future of, what I think is a very special and specific, American culture.

And that's the topic I have been avoiding: the future. The unknown in my life has spread, and I am no longer as sure of myself as I was when *Sound American* started; some of my bluster and confidence has been eroded by reality, and I am faced with the reality of the journal's sustainability. Beyond the persistent questions of how to fund each issue without giving into

advertisement, I have to wonder at what point the energy and focus will dip below a heretofore unseen line of diminishing returns; when does the publication cease being a project of passion and become the obligation of an increasingly cranky and unhelpful editor. Time has moved on, and I wonder if what this journal has to say is as necessary as it once was, or if it is time to cede this small amount of ground to different opinions voiced in different ways.

Sound American has done much more than I could have ever predicted. Its community—from Lisa and Mike to the boards and contributors, and, of course, the readers—is the project's treasure, and it will inform whatever the journal leaves behind when it is time to be left behind. The journal has inspired a growing number of self-published projects committed to telling different stories in different ways, and I've spoken with a handful of new editors and publishers to help them find printers, designers, and bookstores for their overwhelmingly beautiful contributions to the cultural and musical conversation. But, most importantly, *Sound American* has remained an honest—sometimes raw and clumsily sincere—document of a people, time, and place with no commercial ties and with minimal window dressing. I am proud to think that this will be the journal's legacy when it is done.

This is not the end, however. I feel that there is something left in the tank, and if economics allow it, I remain committed to the tenets that *SA* are based on: 1. Talking about the complexity of being human in the simplest possible form; 2. Adhering to the elemental human right not to be advertised to (with thanks to saxophonist Josh Sinton for the idea and articulation); 3. Allowing people to take responsibility for their ideas; and 4. Highlighting the greatness contained in human creativity.

Through all my personal weakness, I find myself relying on these principles as being worthy of energy. And so, barring life, this is not a goodbye to *Sound American*. Consider it a state-of-the-journal address. A particularly stormy one, perhaps, but sincere. I want to thank you all for your continued support, whether that is economically through your purchase of individual issues and subscriptions, editorially through your thoughtful critiques, or emotionally through kind words issued in person or via email. I am apprehensive about a lot of things, but the quality *SA*'s readership has never been one of them Our shared future will spawn a lot of wonderful conversations, a few beneficial arguments, and hopefully a spread of the ideals and commitments of this small, mostly inconsequential, music journal into an unknown future.

NICO MUHLY

I saw Nico Muhly only once, in 2018. I was coming out of the subway near Lincoln Center, and as I reached the top step, I saw a tall flash of all black sweep ~~to~~ left. It was like being a witness to pure energy. At the time, the Metropolitan Opera was performing Muhly's opera based on Alfred Hitchcock's film, *Marnie*, so his presence made sense. But something wonderful happened in that moment. Catching a glimpse of the composer as he rushed down Broadway renewed a small part of my romance with New York City.

Growing up, I imagined the city as a place where you traveled amidst creativity made flesh and bone: John Zorn zipping through the Lower East Side; Phil Glass towering in mid-town; Cecil Taylor drinking at the 55 Bar; Ornette Coleman holding court on Prince Street. Since moving here in 2001, I have—in fits and starts—experienced that kind of exhilaration of proximity. But it has always been tinged with a sort of nostalgia—sighting as a re-creation of my ~~childhood's~~ imagination.

That's what made the glimpse of Muhly so special. He—as someone of my generation engaged in ~~changing~~ a world larger than my insular musical circle—made the creative energy of New York contemporary. He was hurrying to continue a tradition and push it further, and he had no time to spare. It would be hyperbole to say that Manhattan seemed to stand still in that moment if I hadn't felt it so vividly.

Muhly does not need ~~a small music journal~~ to make him known to the world; he is that rare composer of interesting music that you can bring up in small talk. But he still immediately agreed to talk to me and made the time to be fully present through the entire process of our discussion. I would email him questions and ~~would~~ receive his ecstatic, rapid-fire, and hilarious answers via the memo recorder on his phone, the perfect discursive analog to that flash I experienced on 66th Street. I was most interested to find out about how he tapped into the energy necessary to negotiate his incredibly packed creative life.

NW It seems like you simultaneously work in three moments: dealing with the promotion of something just released, premiering a new piece, and preparing upcoming compositions. What are you finishing, and what's next on the horizon?

NM I've just come out of a very elaborate few months of conducting and performing and travel. I had a couple of weeks in Japan and then a few things in the city. I was in Doha for a month at the same time as the World Cup doing a series of dance pieces in collaboration with Benjamin Millepied, the choreographer, who's an old, old friend. December was relatively calm and just a lot of

writing. After that I was in London for about a week just dealing with various things, and then I was in Freiburg, where an older opera of mine, *Marnie*, was being staged again.

Now I'm home for two weeks before I'm an artist-in-residence in Hobart, Tasmania as part of a festival called Mona Foma. And that's all old pieces, and one little, tiny new thing for choir. All the while I am orchestrating Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* for the Santa Fe Opera which is happening this summer. As we speak, I am in the middle of Act Four, so we're about to get to Pluto's big aria. I've just finished a set of three piano miniatures for Yuja Wang, and she will be performing those in San Francisco; I'll go join her there in early March. This summer is a bunch of teaching: I'm composer-in-residence at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge in the UK, and I'm teaching at Tanglewood at the Boston University Tanglewood Institute and then two weeks in Aspen. In the middle of that is *L'Orfeo*, and somewhere in there I need to finish this children's ballet for the National Ballet of Hong Kong and their artistic director Septime Webre.

So, it kind of goes on and on like this. And it's a combination of performing and writing and this and that. There's an awful lot going on. I travel with my desktop computer and an eighty-eight-key keyboard, and I try on the road to be as diligent as possible about writing at least every day. So, for example, I fly to Singapore next Thursday. Friday is a wash, obviously, because it's an eighteen-hour flight and that day just vanishes (although one gets it back on the return trip). I get into Singapore early in the morning on Saturday, and the first thing I will do is set up my stuff and write for at least an hour before anything else just to get myself kind of ready to go.

NW From the outsider's perspective, you arrived on the scene with your compositional aesthetic fully formed. What was your early musical life like?

NM I would argue that my place in the scene—and I use that term warily—happened after a lot of time in conservatory and as an undergraduate. I also had a bunch of different day jobs, but most importantly, working as a kind of assistant/editor/engraver for Philip Glass. Growing up, my parents had music in the home all the time. Eclectic tastes, too; they listened to everything from Joni Mitchell to [Henry] Purcell. Neither of them is a musician, but they both had enormous exposure to classical music, and particularly contemporary music, because my mother was a fellow at the American Academy in Rome and remained very involved in that institution. So, I grew up kind of knowing what composers were. Her older brother, in fact, was a composer. That having been said, my music sounds very different from that world, which, at least when I was

a kid, was more often than not linked to academia; not necessarily in a bad way, but it was just a different form of music making.

The music that grabbed me early was that of Steve Reich and Philip Glass and John Adams. When I was about nine—after playing the piano for a year or so—I joined an Anglican boys choir in Providence, Rhode Island, and that was the major, kind of seismic, event for me, both musically and personally. [Thomas] Tallis and [William] Byrd and [Orlando] Gibbons. I mean, that music is unbelievably great, right?

In hindsight, what I was most drawn to was that music's lack of romanticism. If you're a pianist around that age—or a teenage pianist—you're playing Chopin and aspiring to Liszt and all this music with a constant sort of ocean-flow of emotions, with climaxes and this performative kind of shape. With Renaissance choral music, it's the opposite of that. It's, of course, meant to be beautiful, but it's never giving too much away. I'm specifically thinking of the Tudor tradition, where these moments of emotional *tumescence* happen rather than one vertical climactic moment. Or, when you do get one of those moments, the force of the drama is so much more overwhelming than in Bruckner or Wagner; thinking about the ending of Byrd's *Infelix Ego* or those gnarly Purcell cadences which give way to a radiant major chord. So, I think a combination of listening to a bunch of that kind of early American minimalism or post-minimalism was combined with the ethos of choral music: No one claps. No one is checking the credits to see who's singing. It's all part of a larger ritual, the liturgy of the day, but also of the liturgical year. So, all those things, I think, inform my practice now.

NW You talk about those early influences with such distinction and love. It makes me think of how my own early listening is still present in the way I think about music. Do you have any music that you've only become aware of recently that is affecting you in a similar way?

NM I had a weird thing during COVID where I could only deal with things I already knew; I couldn't read new books, even. I just completely checked out. And, in terms of music, I'm actually trying to have a pretty closed system right now, because I'm writing so many different things. But I've been listening a lot to [Francois] Couperin and [Jean-Philippe] Rameau, specifically Alexandre Tharaud's recordings of the same, because I'm going to write for him. I've been listening to basically new recordings of old things. I wish I could say that I've been doing a lot more adventurous listening, but it's mainly things from friends. So I just listened to the Totally Enormous Extinct Dinosaurs record. There's a new recording of Steve Reich's *Cello Counterpoint* I've been getting into. I don't know. I regret to inform you that I'm not very interesting in that way.

NW Listening to new music is one of those things that falls by the wayside when I get busy. Lots of work means time and energy has to be borrowed from somewhere else. With the demands of your schedule, do you ever feel like you're missing something?

NM Yes, of course, but I think I'm kind of in denial about that. I mean, one of the things that I missed most during COVID were the serendipitous encounters that you have on the road. Like, I'm in Köln, but amazingly, my friend's band is in town, and it's great to meet up with them by accident. I can go to their sound check just to say hi, and they can come to my dress rehearsal. I hadn't realized how meaningful those things were to me until they were gone during the early two years of COVID.

I miss what used to be, when I was traveling, the tacit assumption that you would just run into people at the bar or at dinner or at the opera or whatever. Of course, that still happens when I'm home, but there's more of an effort, and it's more concentrated into two weeks at a time. There are a lot of things I feel like I miss outside of the intensities of COVID restrictions, but, again, I wouldn't trade my life for the world. I had a crazy moment just the other day when I was flying back from Germany and changing planes at Charles de Gaulle in Paris. I ran into my friend Victoria James, a brilliant sommelier from New York and sat with her and her colleagues at the bar of the Yo! Sushi in terminal 2. That's the kind of chance encounter that became completely impossible during COVID, but which is the sort of thing that gives one a sense of interconnectivity and bliss.

NW Have you had any moments of doubt in your musical life?

NM The answer, of course, is yes. "Am I doing too much right now?" I worry about that every day. I haven't had a day off in months—like a real day off.

NW What's a real day off?

NM For me, it's just being able to write without any other thing to do, and that's so rare. I find myself almost petulantly jealous of my friends who manage, somehow, to take genuine time off, particularly my English friends who seem to be perpetually off somewhere sunny, most decidedly *not* working, posting pictures of their eerily prehensile toes against a backdrop of pristine Spanish beachfront, or, in the case of the gays, that of Mykonos. Oftentimes for me, a day off will be a couple of hours of writing followed by not having to write a recommendation or deal with some schedule nonsense or vaguely combative admin. Although sometimes I actually really enjoy booking plane tickets. It's fun because it's like sports, particularly when you get really frothy with miles and points and vouchers.

I did a lot of high-profile work very early in my life, which felt fun. But it's also a little crazy. I always tell students: the only way to get better is by messing up, by having your piece sound great in your computer, and then hearing it with real instruments and an audience and realizing it doesn't work at all. It also helps you grow, I think, to get a terrible review or harsh criticism. Because I sort of bloomed early, (again, none of this made me particularly happy because I was so worried about other things, to say the least) success itself became a source of anxiety. It's as if I skipped a couple of steps in how you're "meant to do it,", and as a result, it's tricky to situate where I am now at forty-one years old. I'm not worried about how things are received by anyone other than my friends and my collaborators, but it isn't *not* a worry, if that makes sense.

NW Is that worry based solely on physical and mental health, or is there a musical or career component that comes up?

NM I mean the worry about doing too much is just that; you lose focus and can't do quality control. I've learned that doing one thing at a time can be, for me, kind of mentally oppressive, and that it's better to have a couple of different things on at once. I can always turn something off and then turn it back on. For example, I'm writing the ballet right now, which I took a day off from yesterday. But I'll take half the day today to work on it. But then this afternoon will be *L'Orfeo*. On this upcoming trip, I want to be mainly focused on *L'Orfeo* for a week, and then send it off for a rough zhoosh from my publisher, during which point I'll turn back to early mornings on the ballet and then performing, teaching, and so on. It just keeps me focused to have things bouncing off each other.

I was diagnosed as being Bipolar II a bunch of years ago, and one of the things that was tricky about that is that I had already been so "successful" by many metrics—as viewed from the outside—but, in a lot of ways, I was so out of it. I knew something was really off when a friend of my parents came to an opera I had at the Met, and she said, "You must have felt ten feet tall when you came out to take a bow." And I thought: "Wow. No. I feel about as accomplished as if I'd done all my errands for the day and tidied up the studio." All that imagined joy, all the adrenaline was completely absent. That isn't to say that you should write to get applause, or to have really high-profile work, but realizing that I had so few genuine emotions and living in a sea of grey, or, occasionally, the sparkler-bright but frighteningly dangerous beauty of a hypomanic episode.

There were a lot of pieces that I wrote during that time that I don't remember writing, because I was in either a state of mania or a state of worrying about all that, about my mental health. And

interestingly—I don't want to say upsettingly—that work is actually really good. A lot of the pieces of mine that are played come from that period, and it was a very fecund period, both on the piece-to-piece level but also in a more macro-level of finding a harmonic language. There's that. But I refuse to glamorize mental illness; I refuse to do it, and I can't stress this enough.

I think part of my discipline pre-existed before my current equilibrium, which is the result of a big medication reset in 2015. But before, even when things were crazy, I had a good routine. So, getting up early, taking my meds, going to therapy, exercising often, all those things come from an awareness that this kind of routine—which you can bring with you anywhere—is really important. I'd like to think that even when I was the most checked out, or dangerously keyed-up, I held onto that core set of rituals.

NW There are a lot of misunderstandings about neurodivergent ways of being, and often it seems that they're seen as a path to creativity.

NM I've had strangers say, "I read your essay about [being diagnosed Bipolar II], but part of it must be a *gift* to be so (now we would say) neurodivergent." I find that offensive. I would really love to not be afflicted this way. I always jokingly say that if that's a gift, I wish I'd kept the receipt. There was a long period of being on the wrong medication and the usual things that accompany these forms of illnesses—I don't know if we still call them illnesses—which are tricky to navigate, particularly as an artist. There was a version of medication which definitely dampened the mania but left very little spark. I say this cautiously, because, again, I have no interest in glamorizing this or making it seem like people should not take medication if they need it; there are enough out there for BPD [Bipolar Disorders] and many other things where you should be able to find one for you that strikes a balance between overall health and your ability to create.

My state of mind caused me to have a lot of sort of difficult interpersonal relationships, particularly as it related to people in my professional life who weren't as intense as I was; who weren't working nineteen hours a day; and who were able to find time to take vacation. I was, of course, foully jealous and furious, and that was not a great way to be. However, I've been on a really stable set of medications for a long time, and I've yet to experience the same sense of insecurity that I had about it maybe seven years ago.

NW So, a little thought experiment: It's thirty years from now, and everything has worked out just as you desired. Where do you see yourself in this best-of-all-possible-worlds? How and what are you composing? How are you living? How would you hope people see you?

NM I hope I would be doing exactly the same thing, but with one more day off every sixteen days and a slightly bigger apartment. I don't know; I'm pretty happy with how everything's looking structurally. I think I'm not taking too much work that I don't want to take because of money. I'm really proud that I can live in New York and have a perfect, fabulous studio which I share with dear friends, and I pay for it by writing and playing music. And whether or not that's film music, or ballet or whatever, I think maintaining that sense of constant work is important to me. What am I composing? I don't know. How would I hope people see me? I can't control that!

It's interesting: a lot of your questions are about perception. And that's just something I had to give up when I was in my late twenties. I push back on my friends, for example, when they describe someone's music as underrated or overrated. First of all "overrated" is how Trump thinks and talks. Also: thinking about how something is perceived gives that perception dominance over the work itself, which I refuse to do to my own work and the work of others. It's a kind of unseen perception; it's a fun house mirror. Or I'd like to say human centipede, but that's a little bit nastier.

I always recoil slightly when I see people *thanking* reviewers for a good review, because you think: "What do you say if it's bad? Or mixed?" I hate the idea that how something is "received" or perceived should have any bearing on what the actual-thing-itself is. When I have friends who have a big piece or small piece or any kind of piece, instead of reading a review and then congratulating them on a good one or ignoring it if it's bad, I would prefer to call them up and say, "I would love to see a score, and I would love to hear a recording." Then you can think about it in a way that has nothing to do with how it was received, which I think is much more honest.

NW Where do you think the music world would be headed if we expand that thought experiment?

NM I think things have changed so much in the last five years that it's unimaginable to think what will happen in thirty, and I can't begin to foresee it. I think the trajectory that we're on now is an interesting one. I mean, there's only good that can come out of having very difficult conversations in classical music about who has access to the spaces; and who has access to the mechanism of commissioning; and what those spaces and mechanisms are on the most basic level. I think we're having all of those conversations as a result of years of ignoring really crucial discussions about race, about money, and about music's value in society. And I should say that, as someone who works equally in the States and in the UK, the recent arts funding cuts in the UK have really exposed how the sausage is made in a way that is making people pay attention.

Something interesting about COVID is that it made us all look at how we're supporting ourselves and each other—both financially and emotionally—as a community, and what the connection is between the big organizations and individuals. I think it's necessary to be kind of uncomfortable, to make one another think about difficult topics and to sit in that discomfort for as long as it takes. I hope that in thirty years, our world will feel at least a little bit more equitable, and that what work there is to do will feel more joyful.

NW Do you see any examples of an institution really getting it right?

NM I worry about the changes that are happening now in all sorts of different ways. Are they structural or are they cosmetic? Some organizations are involved in real positive upheaval: "Let's remake this thing; let's reconsider this thing." And then there are others where it's as if nothing happened. Honestly, with these questions about equity—both race and class and all their intersections—I am very glad that it is not my job to deal with this on an institutional level. Obviously I can do it in an interpersonal level and on the level as a friend and a colleague and on the level as someone who teaches younger people, either formally or as an informal mentor. I'm sure that there are organizations that are killing it, but I can't single any out. One thing that often goes unspoken in these conversations is the built-in differences between how far in advance large institutions need to plan versus a small ensemble, for instance, who can pivot a lot faster than the giant cruise ships of big opera houses and orchestras. I think large and small institutions can put good pressure on one another to make different kinds of changes.

I'm not sure it will ever be resolved. Look at the criticism of the mode of protests for equality. At first, it was like, "Why can't you just be peaceful?" But when people take a knee, it's like, "We didn't mean like that." The perception of it is always wrong. And I think institutions are going to have to realize that you're never going to nail it, right? It's never going to be like, "Okay, cool. Done. All fixed." It's a continual process that has to happen every day, every year, every season. It's sort of an asymptotic thing that we need to think about all the time to keep undoing prejudices, and to find all the individual ways in which we can all do better.

ELLEN FULLMAN

Insight comes at strange times. It can arrive with a bang or creep into you, becoming louder and louder until you can't ignore the truth it's trying to reveal. I experienced this slow-blooming kind of epiphany on an unseasonably warm, breezy day in February while listening to Ellen Fullman's *The Long String Instrument*. It's increasingly rare for me to sit and listen to the whole side of an LP, but I'd just gotten a vinyl pressing of the music I'd had on a cassette, then CD-R, for a decade, and something about the cloudless sky and a needy cat in my lap justified putting everything aside to reexperience Fullman's music with full concentration.

Fullman's music has a unique occupation with time. Far beyond being a static drone, the overtones she coaxes and controls seem to simultaneously move forward, hang back, and spin in three-dimensional space. But for some reason, that day, I was thinking practically; *The Long String Instrument* inspired me to reevaluate how my own writing and performing could create a similar feeling of moving in simultaneous directions at once. I haven't been completely successful, but the possibility remains out there, a puzzle box containing new technical and compositional questions to consider.

I hadn't met or been in touch with Fullman before requesting this interview. She was the first to write me back, and the warmth I imagined while listening on that spring-like day was made real throughout our zoom call and subsequent emails about the shape of the interview. Our conversation progresses here—now that I reread it—in the spirit of my understanding of her music: moving forward and backward in time, sometimes spinning in glorious circles as we speak of relocation, collaboration, and the work that needs to be done before we can truly begin.

NW You're my first interview for this issue, and it's already clear to me that I can't approach all the artists who have agreed to celebrate our thirtieth issue with the same, stock approach. But my initial idea was to just ask interesting people how they work and how their work is affected by the world around them.

EF So it's kind of an overview of where the scene is at and how things going on in the world are affecting the scene.

NW That's one way to look at it. I think another way is that I'm asking different creative people at points in their career about their moments of "taking stock." I'm not the only one that has questioned their life and work, and a lot of our readers are artists and musicians that may benefit by hearing someone like you talk about similar concerns.

EF Well, it's a funny time right now in that so many difficult things are happening. Obviously the world seems to be in disarray from COVID. And then I've never experienced something like this inflation, and I lived through the mid-seventies and everything and the Reagan years. It makes you wonder how do you manage financially?

NW Is that a question you're asking yourself a lot at the moment?

EF Yes because my income stream just isn't sustainable. I need to reevaluate what to do.

NW I think of your instrument as so iconoclastic and specific to you that when I see other people playing it, like I did in the video you sent me,[1] that felt different to me. How long have you been working with other people on your instrument?

EF I started working with other people playing my instrument in 1984. David Weinstein was my first collaborator, and Arnold Dreyblatt played my instrument with me in 1985. But it's on and off. From the mid-eighties through the mid-nineties, I did a lot of stuff with a group playing my instrument with me. And then I dropped away from that because I wanted to develop the articulation, the tone, the timbre. And I think the more I learned [by working on my own], the more sensitive I became as a musician. Part of that was studying Indian music; my sensitivity to timbre and articulation became more sophisticated, I think, and I was no longer satisfied with my sound palette. So, I kind of withdrew and made it a point to practice my instrument just like any other musician would and not think of it as a sound installation, but as a musical instrument. I moved to Seattle in the mid-90s, and that was really the place where I practiced a lot because I was around a lot of improvisers, and I couldn't improvise. I wanted to engage, and I was not technically able to change the dynamics of my sound. I practiced touch dynamics, technical stuff.

NW So that move to Seattle opened a certain path for working on your instrument. Did it also open a door to more gigging in general?

EF I would say that door was opened through Pauline Oliveros, because we put out a duo album [*Suspended Music*] around then. We recorded it in 1994. It came out in 1998. We each had a commission to write a piece. Pauline brought the Deep Listening Band several times to work with me in Austin, and she wrote an improvised part for me. It was just a shock to try to do that. It was fun, but that was a real leap for me.

NW What was the reason for moving to Seattle, if you don't mind me asking?

EF It was personal. I had a relationship, and the heat in Austin was getting to me. In Austin at that time, in the early 90s, there was very little interest in experimental music. There wasn't really the scene that I enjoyed in New York, so the whole idea of doing work in that area was off the map in Austin. Any interest in my work came through Deborah Hay's dance community. And so I thought Seattle would be better, but there wasn't really more happening there, just a small group of friends collaborating. Career-wise it was static. You're just like out there on the edge of the world. Well, the whole West Coast kind of feels that way.

NW I understand that. I grew up in that part of the world.

EF The weather is just like a cocoon, and you just stay in your zone, indoors!

NW But you moved there hoping for career advancement.

EF Exactly. Hoping. But what can I expect doing this unorthodox thing, requiring a 2,000 square foot space and days to install? I chose this path, and it is amazing that I've gotten as many gigs as I have doing this! Good things did happen, though. I had an amazing time working with the Pat Graney Company, I was awarded an Artist Trust Fellowship, I worked with and heard many great musicians, Lori Goldston, Angelina Baldoz, Mathew Sperry, Paul Hoskin, Jessika Kenney, Stuart Dempster, Jarad Powell, Tari Nelson-Zagar.

NW But it sounds like what happened, ultimately, is that the move gave you time to explore other things. And having that time affected everything that came after it. Is that a fair thing to say?

EF Yeah, but life was difficult, because in order to carve out an hour a day of practice—my instrument is like a bear to carry around—I was working full time as a graphic designer. And all my money was going right out the door to pay for studio space. It was not sustainable.

NW What you do is not versatile in the sense that you can pick up random gigs, but that's what makes it beautiful and special. I think that's one of the reasons that people are drawn to the music that you make. But it also means that each of these moves—New York, Austin, Seattle, now the Bay Ares—probably affected the way you played and thought about your instrument.

EF Every city I lived in has influenced my work. I lived in Minneapolis/St. Paul. I was in Kansas City. I went to art school there. I was in New York City for five years, and I went to Austin for eleven years, and then I moved to Seattle for seven years. And in the meantime, I was in Berlin on a DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst German Academic Exchange) for a year. And then I was also in Tokyo for the Japanese Friendship Commission/NEA

fellowship studying traditional Japanese instruments. And every city that I've lived in has totally affected what I do and what I'm interested in.

NW Do you feel like the Bay Area is a place that is feeding you in a way the other cities couldn't?

EF Yeah, it does fit my aesthetic here. But I mean, unfortunately, now Mills [College] has collapsed; that was my scene, really, the orbit around Mills. But yeah, there's this idea of tuning and experimental instruments and all the whole history of what California is known for. It's good to have access to that.

NW You've talked about studying Japanese traditional instruments and Indian music. Were those subjects you were interested in prior to creating your instrument, or were those things that came from its creation?

EF It's the latter. The instrument itself, in a way, is my music school. It happened, and then I realized more could be done with it. And so I just kept trying to develop it. Indian music was a big part of that, and Japanese music was kind of a fun thing that I got into. I had a gig at Super Deluxe in Tokyo, and there I casually heard *Ainu* music,[2] and I just loved how it made me feel; it was so positive, so joyful. I wanted to know more about it, so I just took my chances and arrived there and started researching. Maybe now it's a little bit easier, but as an outsider, it's really hard to connect with anyone in Japan to teach you. I found an eighty-three-year-old woman, Tomoko Tomita, who was an expert, and I had a translator and traveled to her house out in the suburbs of Tokyo every week and practiced. That was really fun, and that has influenced my work.

NW One of the things that attracts me to your music is its joy.

EF I am attracted to joy in music. I like Terry Riley. I like Pauline Oliveros' music, you know? Of course, I like some darker things too, but I do appreciate the ability of music to be uplifting. It can function that way. I think it's good. We could all use that a little bit.

NW What sort of things did you find in Ainu music that affected the music you were making once you got back home?

EF Nothing directly. I studied the *tonkori*,[3] but I had already created the box bow, which is that little box that strikes my strings rhythmically. (I put out an album of songs using the box bow called *Ort* in 2004 with Konrad Sprenger, and I went to Japan in 2007.) Somehow the feeling of the *tonkori* rhythmic patterns crept its way into my music; the attraction there reminded me of the box bow.

NW And with the Indian music, I assume you were studying things that had more to do with tuning?

EF I studied vocal music, and so I learned *raag* scales. I had a vocal teacher for four years in Austin, Anita Slawek, who was con-

nected with the University of Texas, and I went to her home and had lessons.

NW And do you feel like that made its way into the way that you play now or the music you play now?

EF In a way, I do, because I feel like there was something about the timbre of the *tamboura*.[4] I wished my instrument was, at the time, less jagged and more round in the harmonic voice. And so I just kept doing stuff to the instrument—with the wood and with the wire and with how I touched the string—to move the timbre in that direction. But I also created my own scales based on the principles I learned from modes and *raags*.

Interestingly, the limitation of my instrument is that I can't play glisses—and I love glisses so much. They're where the expression is. I really enjoy working with a musician who can gliss. Theresa Wong on our album, *Harbors*, for example, where a gliss may flow over the kind of overtone bed is interesting compositionally. Incidentally, that album is co-composed, as is *Fluctuations*, my album with trombonist Monique Buzzarté. They both composed their own parts.

NW Would you ever want to look into finding a way that you can gliss?

EF It's not possible. I already know. I've looked. No, you can't do it.

NW This is the sort of thing I find so interesting about the creative process. You tried to find a way on your instrument to gliss, and it couldn't be done. So, now you've found this other way, by adding other people to the process, and that addition changes the way that you work. I'm fascinated by how people, in facing a challenge, find creative solutions. It's the idea of limitation being a possibility for growth.

I want to talk a little bit about the economic stuff you were talking about in the beginning. I think there are a lot of people going through this right now.

EF I think it's a crunch right now.

NW It's a very personal question, but in conversations I've had with friends who have been playing for a living, they're coming up against that same feeling of unsustainability.

EF Yeah, I don't really know what to do. It's difficult to keep the work going, but at the same time, I'm backlogged. I've got stuff that I really need to fulfill and once I do, then things perhaps will flow better.

I am committed to write a string quartet for JACK Quartet. And I don't have a music background, so I'm finding other ways of working with sound and midi to come up with notation that they can use. The process is kind of daunting. For example, I have my

tuning world based in ratios, then I will apply the Extended Helmholtz-Ellis Just Intonation (HEJI)[5] accidentals to standard notation, which JACK can read. And then I have found that none of the more sophisticated sounding Kontakt midi instruments are tunable with tuning scripts. I use Scale Workshop[6] for generating tuning scripts, and then work in Pro Tools collaging real-time recordings of my instrument with midi instruments. I ended up just using a sine-tone because that's the only precisely tunable sound I could find to use. I decided to make a series of sine-tone "instruments" mapped to twelve-tone scales so the notes would fall out onto the staff notation in more or less the correct position. Then, when the tonality shifts in the piece, I compose with a differently tuned sine-tone instrument, rather than laying out the pitches in a long chromatic list that has no relationship to the piano keyboard. There are all of these technical aspects, getting the sine-tone in the correct ranges for viola, cello, etc.; importing the midi performances into Dorico;[7] assigning Kontakt midi instruments to those files and adding the HEJI accidentals to the notes for play back in tune in Just Intonation. I'm dealing with putting in place all of this structural stuff in order for me to be able to write a string quartet. That's my choice; it's my problem. But it's a nightmare. I also really feel the need to diversify. Once you have been awarded all the fellowships that can be applied for, there are only project grants and commissions. There don't seem to be any grants available for a commission to compose a work for myself to perform my own music.

NW I think institutions value the composer/performer package, but not enough to give them money yet. But I think there is something valuable in having to go through the process you're going through now to write that piece, something that changes the end result. It's kind of like the move to Seattle and how it changed the way you approach your instrument. I'll be interested to see what that process is like for you when you finish, how you feel about it, and what the music ends up sounding like. Is that something that you'd want to do more of now that you're kind of deep in that process?

EF Yeah, I think once I establish some sort of a working method, then I could do more. That's the thing. It's sort of like a bottleneck for me. It's like I'm thinking that I can't really apply for any grants to do another composed project until I finish this one. I will need to have a successful work sample before I can move forward.

NW It's also almost like you have to find a way to teach the language that you speak so that other people can understand it. It's a very valuable process, but I'm sure it takes a ton of time to make that translation.

EF It does.

1 From *Elemental View* with the Living Earth Show (Andrew Meyerson and Travis Anderson). The full-length performance as well as excerpts can be seen at Fullman's site: ellenfullman.com/elementalview

2 Traditional music of the indigenous Ainu people of Japan who were removed from the mainland to the northern island of Hokkaido. It uses of multiple musical forms such as short, simple ballads and epic poetry to orally transmit cultural rules, tales, and legends.

3 A five-string plucked instrument used in Ainu music.

4 A long-necked, fretless Indian lute

5 A collection of graphic accidentals used to indicate justly tuned intervals and their cents deviation from equal temperament designed by Marc Sabat and Thomas Nicholson. For more info go to plainsound.org

6 sevish.com/scaleworkshop

7 A music notation software

NATASHA PICKOWICZ

If you were to draw yourself an interpersonal Venn diagram, you'd find there were some people in your life that would seem to occupy a different piece of paper altogether. They don't appear to overlap with your world at all, but somehow, intuitively, you find yourself floating into each other's circles over and over again. It is these kinds of acquaintances that keep our lives from becoming staid and narrow; they provide our existence with depth of color and new frequencies of sound; they challenge the way we see the world.

I first found heard of Natasha Pickowicz when she published a long and fascinating interview with the cellist Charles Curtis in *Paris Transatlantic*, the now-sadly-defunct website run by Dan Warburton. Curtis was a mythical figure for me at the time, hard to pin down before the more recent proliferation of his playing and thought online and on recording. Pickowicz's interview was the first time I'd had a chance to experience Curtis's thinking and aesthetic, and her way of writing and letting his words resonate became an inspiration for me as an editor and interviewer.

A few years later, I played a very snowy, very packed concert in a basement at Cornell University. At the time, Pickowicz was a central part of the Ithaca music world, and she told me she was there that night. Neither of us remember if we met or not. It was a very special evening for me, a fairly brutal and energetic duo concert with Paul Lytton, who used a metal box as a bass drum and was a particularly confrontational sonic duo partner that evening. The fact that Natasha was there has now overlayed itself onto the memory of that evening.

Sometimes the connection between two worlds needs a catalyst, and ours was Jeremiah Cymerman. An important figure in both the music and culinary worlds, his ability to naturally bring people in and make them feel at home has been central to his 5049 podcast (which remains one of the best documents of the contemporary New York music scene) and his success in the world of New York fine dining. It was through his connection to restaurants that he met Pickowicz as her star was on the rise. And in one of his last interviews for the podcast, he invited her to talk about her career as a pastry chef and her early work as a music writer and promoter. A lightbulb went off, worlds connected, circles overlapped.

We didn't officially meet until I attended an Issue Project Room gala event at which Pickowicz was volunteering her culinary talents. It was my first chance to eat her food, which made me rethink some preconceptions about what food could be. And it was my first chance to chat with her, which did the same for how I defined creativity. I was, and still am, in awe of her drive and accomplishments, but she also has the ability to be naturally warm, casual, and friendly, qualities I think are evident in our chat, undertaken via email in the midst of the release of her first cookbook.

NW For most of the world, you are a three-time James Beard Award finalist, one of *Time* magazine's "100 Next," a revolutionary baker, and a community organizer. But, to a small group of us, you are a music fan and writer; I first encountered you through an interview you did with cellist Charles Curtis. What strange path brought you to being an experimental music fan *and* one of the world's great pastry chefs?

NP Finding my path towards pastry has been long and confusing and exhilarating, full of self-doubt and anxiety. Maybe these complicated feelings are similar for anyone who learns about themselves as they inch their way closer to their passions—self-discovery can feel harsh but also liberating. There was certainly plenty of heartbreak and failure around getting to where I am now.

Growing up, my passion was almost exclusively music: thinking about it, listening to it, being around it. (My personal music training ended in high school, where I played the piano in my high school jazz band and was classically trained for about eleven years.) I certainly wasn't thinking much about pastry during those years! As a teenager, I was fanatical about going to live shows, but limited by what was available to me in San Diego, and what my parents would allow me to see. But because my parents taught at UCSD, they were familiar with the legendary all-ages straight-edge cooperative Che Cafe; my dad would also sometimes hold office hours there during the day, because they had a cheap, vegan kitchen that made delicious food. So my strict parents allowed me to go to that venue, but not other places downtown or further east. In the late 90s and early 00s I saw local San Diego bands like The Locust throw furniture off of the roof of the Che, I bought CDs by San Diego bands like Hot Snakes and No Knife at Lou's Records. I bought used Black Flag CDs there, too and by extension methodically went through every band I could find in the SST catalog. I heard about Sonic Youth through their SST releases, and they became the first rock band that introduced me to avant-garde, no wave, the NYC downtown scene, free jazz, all of it.

At Cornell as an undergrad, I helped out at shows with the Fanclub Collective, which put on big indie rock shows with bands like Interpol, but also really cool weird noise shows with bands like Wolf Eyes, Sunburned Hand of the Man, and White Mice. I was pretty deeply into the American noise scene that really exploded around 2005 and 2006, right when I graduated, but I noticed that a lot of those bands didn't tour through Ithaca.

I was driven by this selfish desire to see the bands I loved come to the town I lived in, which eventually became a commitment to build a scene in central New York for improvisational and

experimental music. It was my biggest passion. That dovetailed with the kind of sporadic journalism I was hoping to do, too, writing tiny record reviews for *WIRE* magazine, *Signal to Noise, Paris Transatlantic, Foxy Digitalis*—all of the spots that were writing about noise and improv at the time. (*Pitchfork* never bought any of my pitches, haha.)

At the same time, I was working as a programmer at WVBR (the local rock station made famous by Keith Olbermann) and then as the Arts & Entertainment Editor at the *Ithaca Times*, the local alt-weekly newspaper. I always featured musicians I admired, like James McNew, Alan Licht, Aki Onda, Pharoah Sanders, when they came to town to play.

Faculty and staff at Cornell and Ithaca College also helped bring new voices to the town; I think it was when the percussionist Tim Feeney was hired at Cornell that I learned more about the genre EAI [Electro-Acoustic Improvisation] and labels like Intransitive, who released albums from Bhob Rainey, Greg Kelley, Jason Lescalleet, Vic Rawlings, and others from that scene. My partner at the time and I booked a nmperign show at a local record shop and it was one of the most riveting, paradigm-shifting shows I had ever seen in my life. It was the kind of night that underscored for me why live performance is so essential; it felt critical that I was able to experience it in person.

I was booking shows constantly but started to incorporate other genres outside of noise and drone and improv—Jack Rose or Windy & Carl or Michael Chapman or great local Ithaca acts like cellist Hank Roberts or string bands like Evil City String Band. I loved sharing outsider and avant-garde music with my community, but I think what I really loved was the act of bringing people together, creating community around sound, and meeting all of the smart and funny people I met through producing these shows.

That's how I felt about interviewing musicians, too—it was this chance to get a complete oral history from a person, to talk until we exhaust ourselves, to commune over music and art. It was such a pleasure. I was lucky enough to conduct long interviews with musicians like Charles Curtis, the percussionist Jon Mueller, Mission of Burma founder Roger Miller, the filmmaker Paul Clipson—artists with long and remarkable histories. They almost function, in my opinion, as archival pieces; maybe the interviews are too long to read in one sitting, but it makes me feel really good to know that they exist and are out there. I used to bring a small recorder with me to every interview; it would take me days and days to transcribe the conversations. I would submit the interviews often as an unedited transcript, with an introduction written by me. I was very lucky to have relaxed editors like Dan Warburton, who

allowed me to submit ridiculously long pieces, because there was, I felt, a sanctity in keeping the conversation complete and whole.

To go back to food: The way that food and music organically came together was of course through the kind of community-building that happens within small music scenes. I booked and promoted a lot of touring musicians, which meant that not only was it my responsibility to source equipment, book a venue, meet their guarantee, and promote the event, but also, in many cases, to provide food and lodging for the musicians.

It meant a lot to me to provide a warm, clean, and inviting home for people to sleep; just as important were the meals I could provide, which I really loved cooking myself, knowing especially that most musicians weren't eating as well as they wanted while on the road, and that a nourishing and delicious and healthy meal was often a highlight of a small-town stop. I put so much thought and energy into those feasts, often creating elaborate dinner party-style menus with appetizers, savory pastries, and a big dessert to finish, all from the basic Barefoot Contessa and Julia Child books.

I started to find that sometimes musicians would ask me to book a date in their tour schedule because they were looking forward to those meals and the time that we would get together. Later, when I lived in Portland and Montreal, I kept booking shows, but the cooking became more confident and prominently featured in the night. The organist Blake Hargreaves used to curate this great noise and experimental music festival in Montreal called Cool Fest; for two years in a row he asked me to cook food for all the guests: The Cool Feast. For the first time, I felt like I was part of the "lineup." It was great to be included like that. I prepared super elaborate themed menus, like a rustic French menu with *coq au vin* and chocolate ganache tart, or a Baja California menu with stewed beans and fresh tortillas, and I think most of the crust punk and noise kids that came through were kind of shocked—in a good way I hope.

When I started cooking professionally, I lost the time (and energy) to promote shows. I was cooking sixty hours a week and exhausted physically in a way that I had never felt before. When I moved to New York in 2013, I was completely overwhelmed with choice and bounty. Compared to Montreal, where there was maybe one cool show a weekend to check out, it felt like there was someone I wanted to see play every night. But I wasn't able to sustain late nights and 5:00 am start times for very long, and soon my obsession with pastry completely took over; my commitment and discipline for seeing live music kind of ended.

My one dream, as a teen through adulthood, was to write a book someday. And even though my life revolves around pastry, I still found my way into book writing. When I sold *More Than*

Cake—my first cookbook—to my publisher, I insisted that it be written by me, in my own voice. I think a lot of professional chefs bring on a writer to create the book together, but I wanted to do everything myself.

Writing this cookbook has been one of the hardest and most rewarding things I've done in my life. I feel it uniquely synthesizes my professional expertise as a chef with my own passions and curiosities for storytelling, art, music, and nature. It feels intensely vulnerable to share this cookbook with the world, even though it's a technical text and not, like, an emotional novel. And yet all of myself is in this book, and writing the chapter openers, the standalone essays, even the 200 word headnotes—brought me satisfaction. I was very inspired by the literary cookbook authors of the Sixties, Seventies, and Eighties: Richard Olney, Patience Gray, Edna Lewis, Elizabeth David, and the more contemporary authors like David Tanis, Paul Bertolli, Rachel Roddy, Brooks Headley—people who bring wit, intelligence, curiosity, and exactitude that goes beyond the instructions or the ingredient list.

Now that I'm cooking full time, I'm searching for ways to bring music *back* into my culinary practice. Part of that is working with organizations like Issue Project Room to support their mission and programming. Part of it is collaborating with local musicians for concerts that feature food as part of the ticket price. Now that I work for myself, I have so much more freedom who I get to work with and why, and that feels really great.

NW You have a reputation for your work with food, of course, but also for your activism. The clearest example of this is your bake sale for Planned Parenthood which started, I think, in 2016. What were you seeing then that changed what you wanted to do?

NP I was working in fine-dining restaurants, making and serving food to rich people while making very little money myself. Sensing the inequity of it all made me feel a little disconnected from my work. I was working at restaurants where my friends couldn't afford to eat; I could barely eat there myself without my staff discount. I introduced bake sales to the NYC restaurant industry using the DIY know-how I picked up organizing small noise shows. I was cooking at a lot of "top-down" charity galas—the kind where a seat at the table is $10,000. I didn't want to produce an event like that. I wanted to do the opposite of that. Bake sale felt like the most approachable format I could think of, and I really liked the conceptual tension of asking NYC's greatest pastry chefs to bake a pastry that we could charge for $5.

After Trump was elected in 2016, I was feeling furious and helpless. The way that I think about giving back to my community

is an act of looking inward: what can I offer What do I know how to do? What resources are available to me? And how can I use the tools that I have to build community and share my values? Making pastries and organizing events is what I know how to do, so that's how the first bake sale came out. I learned so much that first year. It was a huge learning curve and a lot of work. We went from raising $8,000 in our first bake sale in 2017 to raising over $100,000 in 2019. 100% of the profits went to Planned Parenthood of NYC (now the branch includes Greater New York).

Once I started doing that kind of work, it became inextricable from my relationship with pastry and baking. Working with non-profits that I love—with causes that I care about—gives my life meaning and fills me with hope and joy. I don't think I would enjoy pastry nearly as much if it were not tied to these organizations and the kind of events that we produce. To me, a small event with ten people is just as moving and effective as a massive event . To me it is all the same; I think they both need to exist. So, I'll make dumplings at the Older Adult Center at the Lenox Hill Neighborhood House with fifteen seniors or produce a bake sale for 800 people at the Cherry Lane Theater; they're equally energizing.

NW This is going to be a naïve question, probably, but when you get up in the morning, what are you hoping to achieve as a creative human being? To give you context, I get up and, of course, I think about work, but also what I want to do musically—what I want to write or how I want people to feel. I was daydreaming a bit today, and I ended up wondering what that kind of wake-up clarity looks like for you.

NP I love this question! Right before the pandemic, I was working full-time for a restaurant group as their executive pastry chef, overseeing multiple properties, pastry teams, menus. It was exhausting; I was running ragged. I would work six or seven days a week, often seventy hours a week or more. I had cultivated very little room for myself outside of my work identity; the drive for perfection in the industry completely consumed me. So, my day-to-day life was mostly about waking up and getting out of the door, managing and nurturing my team, developing new desserts and recipe development, producing off-site events, and just trying to keep my head above water while staying excited about the work around me.

Everything transformed when the pandemic hit, and I lost my job. It was a cathartic period for me; the shock of losing my job left me furious and hurt. I had worked so hard to build something, and then I lost everything. But slowly I looked inward and worked on things that mattered to me without seeking clout from so-called "prestigious" dining institutions, without seeking approval from the

men who managed and controlled me, and without being bound by a schedule or paycheck or really any structure.

I finished my book proposal and sold it. And I started my pastry pop-up, Never Ending Taste, which raised over $10,000 through pop-ups in 2020. I worked on relationships with people I loved and met new people who understood me. And I started feeling a lightness and relief and euphoria around what I was doing. I was (am) still terrified about the finances and stability of it all, but every couple of weeks I'll have this shock of gratitude when I think about how lucky I am to work with people that I admire and respect and cherish, to handle ingredients made with love and care.

NW You have a lot going on right now, and with the book coming out, you're in the public eye a lot. From the outside, of course, we see your confidence and spirit. Were there, or *are* there, ever moments of doubt?

NP Oh my gosh! If my incredible self-doubt and insecurities have not already become apparent in everything I've said before, then I'll happily say it again, haha. I feel like my failures—of which there have been so many—have been absolutely fundamental to how I've grown as a chef and as a person. On a granular level, making mistakes and failing in something like developing a recipe only results in a stronger, more confident, final product. I apply this process to everything I take in around me: trial and error has informed my career and identity in ways that are essential and necessary for growth.

My first pastry job—as the part-time baker for a queer punk luncheonette called Depanneur Le Pick Up in Montreal—was, in a way, a direct result of failure. It was never meant to be permanent. I was desperately hoping to get into grad school but didn't get in anywhere. I was so sure that academia was my path, in the arrogant way that a twenty-three-year-old can be sure about anything.

And as I dealt with the grief of losing my restaurant job in 2020, I started making work without having to run it by some man, without having to serve it to some rich investor, without having to make any concessions at all. It is really scary to work outside of an institution because I felt that I gained clout by association, like I relied on it to have my own sense of self. It felt like I would disappear if I didn't work for this specific person.

Those feelings don't go away completely but they are tempered by the incredible collaborators and colleagues that surround me. I feel the insecurities coming up again with the book release on the horizon; thinking about going on tour fills me either with excitement or dread, depending on the day. It is scary to share this text with the world as a permanent object up for evaluation and derision. I have a hard time filtering out the criticism. One nasty comment will stick with me longer than a hundred positive ones.

I definitely still suffer from imposter syndrome: "Is this book, and by extension my career, a house of cards?" Some days it feels like the slightest thing could knock it all over. With so many beautiful books in the world, do we really need another recipe for a muffin? Every time I hit a new milestone—a good payday, a nice recognition, an exciting gig on the horizon, filing my manuscript with my editor—it feels like all new anxieties and their attendant, nagging questions replace the old ones.

NW Success comes as a mixed blessing; the more attention you get, the more requests come your way (like answer questions from music journals!) How do you feel about your work life/creative life/personal life balance at the moment?

NP I LOVE structure, which is why I thrive in a kitchen environment. The shift starts at the same time every day. The menu changes every month. Dinner begins at 5:30 pm every night. The people keep coming in, so you have to be ready. I was responsible for so many other people, which made me keep my life organized. It's trickier now that I work mostly out of my home. But it also feels gentler and better and safer. I sleep better. I drink less. I go to bed earlier. I have time to read and listen to records.

When I was working in restaurants full time, my apartment, because I was in it so infrequently, was kind of a cocoon. I didn't own a TV or a computer. I didn't have wi-fi. I really needed to keep all of that out of my apartment. But now that I'm home more, I've treated myself to more creature comforts. I still don't have a TV, but I have wi-fi. I bought a computer when I sold my book. Baby steps.

I moved into an apartment with a big garden backyard—a rarity for NYC—and taught myself how to garden. That was a deeply transformative experience. I have always had an appreciation for plants because of my work in restaurants, but it was another thing altogether to grow and nurture them myself. I have a big fig tree, rose bushes, three giant vegetable beds. So most mornings I like to make coffee and go outside, see what's happening in the garden, maybe spend an hour in the beds before doing anything else.

And I cook so much more for myself now! Three simple meals a day, it's really a privilege to make food for myself. On a good day, between all the emails and recipe development and meetings and writing, I'm also cooking and playing with my cat and gardening and reading and watching movies.

Taking long walks is also very important to my writing practice. I am a long distance walker; most of the time I'll go eight or nine miles, way up into Astoria, Queens. It doesn't necessarily have to be a "scenic" walk, although I find the city endlessly fascinating to observe. I just like getting the miles in. I live in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, so I'll cross over into Long Island City and make my way

north, loop around Roosevelt Island, and then walk up to Astoria through Dutch Kills before heading back. Or I'll go through Sunnyside and Woodside and walk through Jackson Heights. I get super inspired by the diversity of groceries and restaurants in that part of Queens; it's my favorite part of the city by far. I could walk forever; it's essential for me now that I work out of my apartment.

NW I want to go back to 2016 for a second. That was a year that sparked a lot of anxiety and action. You managed to turn that energy into something tangible and beautiful. How do you feel about the work you've done in the past six years, and what are the larger trends you're seeing in the communities you work with?

NP I think a lot of "ordinary" people feel kind of helpless when it comes to making a "difference." What I see more is a greater appreciation and movement towards the smaller, grassroots-style neighborhood events that may not be a big splash in a national sense but bring a feeling of security and joy to small communities. Although I recognize that social media plays a huge role in sharing tools and resources and information, I'm an old-school analog lover at heart and I cherish in-person, tangible acts: physical posters, community food fridges, bake sales, protests, talks, classes. I also think that the baking community and pastry chef world is deeply altruistic at heart; it's no coincidence that the people who enjoy making celebratory pastries like huge cakes are also generous people that love bringing people together. I appreciate the power that a cake can have in this way. You don't have to be a commercially successful baker to create a small event for your community.

My work with these institutions is a priority. And I think it is all worth it, even if it only impacts a few people. I still internally struggle with the sacrifices that come with these commitments—every non-paying project I take on is a missed chance to be supporting myself. But I find ways for it to work. I think there is a fine balance for many chefs like me. I work without pay for causes I care about because I *need* to, and once in a while I'll partner up with bigger brands that pay me well, because that helps subsidize the time and labor it takes to execute everything else. I feel optimistic that everyone can find a balance that works for them in their own lives.

PATRICIA NICHOLSON PARKER

In college, I went down a naïve path with Edmund Husserl and phenomenology from which I retain a strange half-remembered/half-read mind experiment. I focus on one small item (initially it was a sewer grate) and will try to reverse engineer the multi-generational story of its origin. Starting with the person who installed it, I imagine each set of hands that have been laid on that grate going back to the mining of the metal ore, or further if I can manage it. I try to spin outward, thinking of lives of the people involved in that object's existence: their families, their neighborhoods and communities, their working conditions and ideas. It's a humbling exercise, and a creative way to kill time.

If you were to play this mental game with the New York free jazz scene of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, you would come across Patricia Nicholson Parker very quickly. She has been directly involved in the mining, production, installation, and maintenance of the scene since the early eighties. And though you may not have met her or know her by sight, you have probably reaped the benefits of her work.

I met the dancer, poet, and organizer almost immediately after moving to New York in 2001. One of my first concerts in Manhattan was an improvised set on which she was one of a handful of dancers. I have definitely taken advantage of her work with the Vision Festival and Art for Arts, not only as a musician who has gotten to play on concerts sponsored by that organization, but as a listener and cultural flaneur that has been influenced by the local musicians she has supported or those that she's brought to the city.

Nicholson Parker is a fighter. She knows herself and her mission and has developed a philosophy of life and work that is inspiring and a reminder of why many of us got into improvising, collaborating, and performing in the first place. She doesn't just run a festival, she's built and maintained something larger: a community, a mutual aid society, a village.

I don't know Nicholson Parker well—this zoom interview was easily the most we've ever spoken to each other, even after performing together a few times over the past twenty years—but I've always admired her work from afar. It's the kind of behind-the-scenes effort that often goes unnoticed until it *isn't* being done. And as she begins looking at passing the torch in the future, a reminder of Vision's history and a celebration of the work she's done with it is long overdue.

NW I want to start with the Vision Festival. The first one was in 1996; is that right? So, this music was happening. You'd been working in the scene. But something must have changed to make you decide to tackle such a big project.

PNP Well, to understand the Vision Festival you must begin two years before with the Improvisors Collective. My husband, William Parker, would come home saying that the only place he would see fellow artists was on tour in Europe or at funerals. The scene for improvised music had lost its venues in New York. This was particularly true for black improvisers. The heart of the scene for Vision is black improvised creative music, black artists. They were the ones who were struggling the most; getting the fewest gigs in Europe; getting the least pay; getting almost no gigs in America. That's why I started the Vision Festival: there was no space for improvised music. There was no infrastructure, no funding, and no one writing about it.

When we were in our twenties, there was a whole scene around us, but since the eighties and nineties, it had either dispersed or just disappeared. We needed to come back together, so I contacted a bunch of artists we had lost touch with—plus some young musicians who had stumbled into our world—and we started the Improvisors Collective. It was about fifty artists, mostly musicians, but a few dancers, poets, and visual artists as well.

After a minute, I realized that having a collective is like having fifty bosses. Even though everyone was supposed to do work—and some people did some work—it all basically landed on me and one or two others to get things done. It was fun and exciting at first, but it was also a lot of work. It was hard for me because I wasn't what you would call the group's natural leader; I had to prove myself to the community. "Who are you? You're a dancer?" But it was a learning process. And it was great in a way.

We had meetings where most everyone would show up. That's how dead everything was!

There was a space called Context Studio at 28 Avenue A. This was where rock and jazz musicians went to rehearse and record—run by Ed Montgomery—a great space. He had a large dance/performance space that he gave us for a reduced rate. We held a performance every week that first year. Whoever was to perform was chosen by lottery, and whoever led that band would also lead an open improv for the second set. I still miss the Improvisors Collective. You could always come each week and improvise. If nothing else, you were active.

Anyway, we sent out press releases each week. Typed it. Printed it out. Put a stamp on it. Mailed it at the post office. But no press ever came. Still, the series was going fairly well, especially at the beginning. Then it began to taper off, of course—that typical problem of getting attention and securing an audience with no support from the press. After two years we thought, "Well, we need to do something that's going to grab more attention." That's when we decided on doing a festival.

NW Did you know what you were getting yourself into?

PNP I had helped organize the Sound Unity Festival in the mid-eighties. The German bassist, Peter Kowald had secured funding from an East German artist, AR Penck, who had become a very successful visual artist and who loved improvised music. Kowald came to New York to work with William Parker to put on a festival. The organizers were Kowald, Parker, and me. This became the Sound Unity Festival. The idea of the festival was to bring together the different improvising communities and pay everyone, and that's how I was thinking when I booked the first Vision Festival. And the idea of community and fair pay has been a part of the philosophy of Arts for Art and the Vision festivals.

An element of community that has always been important to me is social justice. One of the people who worked with me in the first year was Greg Ruggiero. He was a co-founder of the Open Media Series, a small publishing company publishing works by Amiri Baraka, Angela Davis, Howard Zinn, and many other progressive thinkers including a pamphlet by William Parker. Greg approached the Improvisors Collective to ask if we could do a benefit for them, and I said: "Musicians need a benefit!" So, we decided to do a shared thing.

He helped design the first poster and secured the venue. When I was young, I had refused to learn to type, because I thought that if I learned how to type, someone would make me a secretary. If I couldn't type, then I was safe! Since then I've learned how, of course.

NW And you're still safe. You're not a secretary.

PNP Yes (laughing) I'm still safe.

NW I didn't know about the Improvisors Collective, but it makes so much sense as a genesis for the Vision Festival, which is very much about community. You've been presenting the festival in some form for twenty-eight years now. From your perspective, what's the biggest change?

PNP Well, it's a lot more structured. It was never just me, of course. I'm not that kind of person; I always have someone with me.

NW Even from the beginning?

PNP Yes. I organized the first year with Greg Ruggiero with help from musicians, particularly the Israeli saxophonist, Assif Tsahar. Assif was one of the young members of the Improvisors Collective. After the first year, he talked me into getting incorporated, and also into continuing. Actually, a lot of people were saying we had to do it again. It was a big success. The audience for Improvisors Collective was about ten to twenty people. The first Vision Festival at the Learning Alliance sold out, with about 150 or 200 people per night for five nights.

NW That's a big jump.

PNP And that was good. I booked about five groups a night and guaranteed everyone a fee. But I only had one donation of $2,500 that I had secured from a musician of means. I didn't have any other money! I just knew that it would come—that it would be a success—but I can't explain how I knew it was going to work. I promised everyone money that I didn't have. The only logic-based way I could explain it is that I could feel the buzz. Whenever I would talk about it, people perked up. Everyone was excited. It was a right idea at the right time.

NW How would you describe the community around Vision and Arts for Arts? It's a very special group of folks.

PNP If you see that you are part of a community, then you are. To me, the idea of being a creative artist requires a deep commitment, because you're not in it for the money. Right? This is not your path to a mansion; it takes a kind of idealism. Everyone is part of the community if they can see it. Since I can see it, it helps others to see it. My idea was that this is not just a community of musicians and artists. The volunteers, the tech crew, and the audience are all part of our community. They're a more important part of the community than they understand. People don't always get that because they don't understand how interdependent we all are. Artists understand that they need an audience. And the audience likes the music, but they don't understand their part in that relationship, that they're helping to make the performance by the quality of their listening and viewing as well as their donation to the event. The performer feels the audience's engagement, and it shapes the performance. So even on that level, we participate together to create something special, something unique. We cannot fix the whole world, but we can fix the world that we live and work in. And we do it not by berating each other. We do it by setting an example, and through art and kindness we inspire each other; we give hope to each other. Also we keep encouraging the sense of community by holding space for it by giving opportunities to hang together.

NW Do you ever wish the festival could go back to a time when it was a smaller organization?

PNP No, I don't want to go back. Of course there are things and people that I miss. I miss being able to bump into people on the street. Then the artists mostly lived in the same neighborhood. But now I am more interested in building something for the future. Arts for Art is more organized now. That will help. Also the original artists are older, and too many are gone. And so I have been working on bringing the younger artists closer. I'm trying to figure out how to do that best so that the original idealism and commitments to

community and equity and justice and uncompromised music and art remain when I am no longer running things.

NW What kind of commitments?

PNP For example, I have a commitment to black artists. There are two reasons for the black focus. One is that they were being pushed out—and they truly were. It was unbelievable, but believable nonetheless, right? Secondly, this music really came from a black community. When I met William, the scene was almost all black. So, I have a curatorial policy—that I will frankly share with you—that the Vision Festival has to be at least 45% black and also include people of color and women. I actually have this written out. The numbers are approximate and somewhat fluid. I want everyone who comes to feel welcome and included, that there's a space for them that they know. We have a commitment to ADEI in general. We have a commitment to excellence. We have a commitment to bringing the arts together. We have a commitment and responsibility as artists to support those who are under attack so AFA will hold space for the oppressed. But there has to always be an awareness of power games, and that makes everything complicated.

At some point, somewhere around the tenth Vision Festival, I started being told that the music is white now. "This is not black music anymore, so what are you doing?" My eyes rolled and my claws came out. I'm stubborn; do not challenge me on what I believe is important. So it was a hard period, but that's all right. I mean, it was wrong, but I made space for more people, and that was right. I had to adjust, so I did. And that was important.

NW Was there ever a point where you were like, "I'm not going to do this again."

PNP For about the first five years, I had to be talked into it each year. It was way too much work. It basically took over my life. With the Improvisors Collective, I at least had an opportunity to dance regularly. That wasn't true with the Vision Festival. I would give myself a performance each year, but that was one performance a year. In early years some musicians would invite me to perform with them at Vision, but I turned it down because I was afraid that they were asking me to make sure that they would get a gig every year. I wanted it to be clean. Now, I think that is how people often connect, by finding people that they think can help them in some way.

NW How did you come to dance?

PNP When I was three, I told my mother I wanted to be a dancer. I was trained in ballet. Actually, I trained a little bit in everything. But what I really wanted to do was improvise. I grew up listening to all kinds of music. I wasn't like your typical music lover that collected records, but I had my favorite people: Fats Waller, Billie Holiday. And then I liked Ornette Coleman and Gustav Mahler.

When I was about twenty-one, I began looking for music that I hadn't heard yet. That was how I met William Parker. But when I found my way into this music scene, the dance was not accepted. I hardly ever got reviewed in the first twenty years, but one of my favorite reviews said, "I was surprised I didn't hate the dance."

NW Wow. That's really positive. (laughing)

PNP It really is. (laughing) And as an artist, I never saw the distinction. To me, all the arts are one thing.

NW Do you feel like you've gotten to dance enough over the years?

PNP I don't believe in that concept. I mean, the answer is obviously no.

NW Maybe "enough" is a weird way to put it.

PNP I'm sort of humbly proud of what I've done. What I wish is that there was more space for me as an artist to have been able to develop bigger projects. As you can probably tell from my organizational work, I'm a big thinker. And I like to think big in terms of dance, too. I did this project with William called *The Thousand Cranes*. It was for the opening of the United Nations special sessions on Disarmament on June 6, 1982. It was inspired by a story about this little girl who dies of leukemia as a result of America dropping a nuclear bomb on Hiroshima. As she was dying, she tried to fold 1000 paper cranes, because in Asian, and specifically Japanese, mythology, cranes live 1000 years. The crane is a symbol of long life. The paper crane has become a symbol of Peace.

I put together a vision of the whole piece directing and producing. I worked with a friend, Emily Collins, to organize the whole event. I choreographed a group of around six or seven adult dancers plus a few children. We engaged a couple of jugglers and someone to paint the backdrop. William wrote the music and the words for twenty musicians and seven singers. And then the finale had 1000 school children singing and wearing their own, homemade crane wings. This was a major organizational effort! I think big, but it was very difficult because I didn't have a name, but we did pull it off. We got a stage built, Dag Hammarskjold Plaza was packed with people from Japan and everywhere else, and it went off *with* a hitch.

NW Which is the realistic way to put it. (laughing)

PNP I naturally want to work large. But it's heartbreaking. Occasionally I have done really large pieces, but I only do them once. And it takes everything you have to do it.

NW How do you feel about your dancing now?

PNP What is ironic, and it's humbling, is that people keep telling me I'm better. I think, in general, artists do get better over time, but for a dancer this is unusual because age isn't a friend to your

body. However, fifty is a magic age for most artists; all your stuff comes together. You know who you are, and you're still open and energetic and growing.

I spent most of my life taking care of everyone and still maintaining my dance. But at this point, I've been shifting mentally. I want to make sure that this demanding, open, creative process has a space to exist into the future, while at the same time, I am beginning to make a bit more space for my personal creativity, which actually is uncomfortable being so limited. Words—Spoken Word—come easily to me. I like to improvise text when I dance. I also hear music and direct bands when I have the time to do that. Recently I have been working a lot with singers and mostly women musicians, when I am not doing duos with William. But in order to really have space for my own work, I need to make sure that I am passing down important information and leaving AFA in a very strong position.

NW I think that's a good prompt to ask about Arts for Art. When did it come into existence, and what was the idea behind it?

PNP Well, we can't separate Vision from Arts for Art. We did the first Vision Festival before we had the name Arts for Art. But by the second year, we had incorporated as Arts for Art. Everything was branded as Vision for a long time. And that's why people didn't realize that Arts for Art is the name of the organization. I just kept on using the word Vision because it was the strongest most identifiable title. The name is a little compromised because people think it means arts for art's sake. But it was really a play on artists for artists.

It was built on the concept of self-determination, but we didn't keep the collective because it was unwieldy and constraining. We also did concerts out in parks beginning in 2000. Now our outdoor series is called the InGarden Series. Early on we did things up at McCarren Park in Harlem, because I wanted to make sure the music was in black communities. But I don't have enough of an organic connection to those communities. It didn't really work; it was like bringing in a plant from another country. In terms of community building, you need real ties in the community. They need to be asking for you, and we didn't have the infrastructure to build those ties. But it is what I wanted to do.

NW But at a certain point, Arts for Art became its own thing which supports younger musicians that maybe need some either financial help or help getting their music out. I think a lot of when I came to town and started playing, a lot of the first gigs that I got to play were through you.

PNP Where do you remember playing?

NW One of the very first gigs I played in New York was with you as a dancer, and it was under the banner of Vision.

PNP Sounds like the Vision Collaboration series. It was probably at Context Studios.

NW Yes, that's possible. But then there were years at CBGB's and at Clemente Soto Velez cultural center. All of the different places and the different people who have been affected by that work is pretty profound. So, the last question has to be what the future looks like for you and for Vision and AFA.

PNP That's what I'm trying to figure out. I want to accomplish two things. I want to really renew AFA—and by AFA, I mean the presenter of the Vision Festival, the presenter of all these events and the education program—so that it remains vibrant for another thirty years. If this is going to maintain the flavor, I need to make sure there's a younger generation that really understands all the aspects of it. At the same time, trying to nurture this other generation in a focused way will give me the freedom to not always have to be present.

NW What would you do with some of that free time?

PNP Over the years, I have been writing poems and have been into multimedia. I want to be able to give that much more of my focus than I have been able to. And I want to dance! And I want to spread the ideals of Vision!

NW What do you think needs to happen to retain that vibrancy without you?

PNP I feel like I need to teach what I do. I want to work with a group of young artists who can commit a little bit of their time to make sure I can really teach them about all the ways that they can create a positive community and teach them about the complexities of curation. When I curate, I go over it and over it. How do you really serve your community? It's not a simple thing. You can't just book your friends. But you do have to take care of people who take care of you, because if you don't, then you won't have any friends. There's a balance. And that means extending yourself. "Is this the right balance? Is this the right decision?" And you have to also check to make sure people will show up for the event. I can't book for the inside crowd, because then I'm not taking care of the community. The community needs everyone to come, and there needs to be some consensus.

For example, you must always include someone you don't like. You don't have to love everyone's music. That makes it too much about oneself. I'm extremely opinionated, and I have a right to all my opinions, but I do not have a right to curate according to my opinions. That distancing takes maturity, but maybe it can

also be achieved within a group setting. I'm trying to find the right way. And I'm trying to support what exists and understand it better, so I can understand how I'm eventually going to make this transition happen.

At one point, I had a panel discussion at the festival that asked how economy affects your creative choices. The answers are interesting, but the question is also interesting. We never assume that art is affected by money, but of course it is. If there's no space and there's no funding, then art and the public suffers. It's just not going to be what grows. You won't kill it off, because you can't kill off the spirit that is at its root. Too often we humans pay too much attention to economics and not enough to that spirit core.

This music evolved at the time of the civil rights movement. I don't think it would have occurred without that, because, at that point, a generation of American Black Artists could feel themselves empowered; that they had a right to freedom; that they could feel their entitlement to it. Plus there was a lot of commonality with the anti-war movement. There was this sense of optimism that allowed space in people's spirits and their own being to really open up and push themselves forward into the world in an unconstrained way.

This is a very difficult world, and this is a very difficult time. It's not possible without the support of each other. How else can we survive as an individual and also as a community and also as unconstrained creatives? We need each other. I'm figuring it out, and I'm trying to be as open as possible to finding that. But you stumble forward. The way forward is never as clear as you want it to be. Yeah, that's the way life works, right?

ALBERT OEHLEN

At the beginning of the pandemic, mail became an event; it brought a little brightness from the outside world to days of isolation. And so when I received a surprise package from Gagosian gallery, I dropped everything to investigate. Inside, there were four catalogs from different exhibitions of Albert Oehlen's paintings and a card from the gallery letting me know that the artist was sending them to me with his compliments. To this day, it is a small token that I treasure, keeping the books close at hand and the calling card posted above my desk as a reminder of how a simple gesture can change a mood and affect an outlook on life.

That Oehlen would send these books to me was not totally out of the realm of possibility; I had written him an email thanking him for some much needed support he'd given at the beginning of the lockdown, letting him know how appreciated his attention was, and how his gift had raised my spirits. And now that I know him a little better, this response to my thank you note seems perfectly natural and specific to Oehlen himself: short and to the point, letting his paintings speak in place of words.

Since then, he and I have spoken a few times. I recorded a soundtrack with Chris Corsano for the English-language version of his incredible film, *Artist*, and I was lucky enough to talk to him via facetime about the direction of the music and little bits about our lives and work in general. He was always friendly and quiet as we talked, with the Swiss countryside behind him and the plain white walls of my Brooklyn apartment behind me.

The *Painter* project wrapped up, and we fell out of touch as he and I both moved on to other projects. Even though our relationship never went beyond small talk and questions about the work we were doing together, I have missed talking to Oehlen at times. I can't explain it, but I think I get a sort of joy from his matter-of-factness and nonchalant dedication to something spectacularly deep and personal. And each time I see a new series of his paintings, I am affected by their psychic size, because I can sense the quiet presence and sly smile of the artist behind them.

This interview was at the top of my wish list for this issue, but it also was the one I was least convinced would happen. I was shocked when Oehlen returned my email within the hour, saying he would be happy to answer my request. I sent him some very abstract questions and waited. After about a week of silence, I realized that my proposed questions, which were very tenuously based on abstract ideas of time and speculations about the future of the art world, were not the sort that he would be predisposed to answer. I wrote back to him, admitting my mistake and promising a better set of questions if he didn't mind starting over. His response was typically Oehlenesque: "Yes, I was just going to ask you for

something more concrete." I did my best, and in the end, he answered some questions from each set, even attempting to get into the more nebulous areas, always with the laconic conversational style I had been missing.

NW How would you characterize your work at this moment?

AO The paintings that I've worked on for the last two years are based on the idea of combining a certain manner of painting with variations of one particular shape. For the most part, the painting inside this particular shape sits on a yellow background. On a few paintings the "free" painting is the background, and the color field is inside.

NW It seems like a simple concept—shape, color field, free painting—but the more I imagine it, the more sensitive and difficult it becomes to pull off.

AO I have to control the balance of the two levels. The idea doesn't make the painting. It could easily go wrong.

NW How do you define the "one particular shape"?

AO The shape is a bit aggressive, depending on how I do it. It might be a cephalopod or a bust or a headless body with spread legs. It is futuristic, evil. I call them "Omega Men."

NW What do you hope it communicates to its audience?

AO None of my works has a particular message. They can only represent my attitude. And they communicate what I have done, hinting at the process of their creation. That is what I like to see and understand in a piece of art. How did they do this? Why did they do this?

NW What epiphanies have you had to steer you to where you are now?

AO I get asked frequently (especially in rural regions) what my inspirations are. I answer that they come from my last work. Your question is more interesting. Something I see or read—or music I hear—can provoke thoughts and ideas. I love to think about decisions made: what's the alternative, opposite, or exaggeration of it. There are artists that are inspiring me as a person. I like to read about them and understand their thinking. To a degree.

NW The thing that strikes me about your work is that you express an idea, focus on it, and exhaust it before moving on to another idea. And that next idea may be something totally different.

AO I don't agree that it is totally different. It looks different but my challenge is the same.

NW you do a film project like *Painter,* or when you've played with Red Krayola, do you feel like that opened up

another direction for your visual art, or is it just a chance to express ideas in a different way?

AO It adds something. Especially the movies. It gives something (false) to the public. That's new for me. I am not wild about being in public, and this is a funny game. [*Painter* is a film in which an actor creates a painting based on Oehlen's instructions, playing the painter. The actual painter only appears in one part of the film as an interviewer of this fictional version of himself.] I learn a lot. I see myself from outside, and it makes me think about my role and my painting.

NW When you're working on a project, does it consume your energy, or are you already thinking of what's next?

AO I often think about the next paintings. That doesn't mean that I do what I think of, but ideas about what I could try are always on my mind.

NW Knowing that this is speculation, where do you hope to go in the future?

AO I hope to go on without making mistakes or wrong decisions. I hope to make good paintings.

NW Do you worry about making mistakes? Your language seems very self-assured. I can't imagine that it is missing anything.

AO There are always things that I am missing. The question is whether I should go for them or work with what I have? For example, a "real" painter knows which color goes where. They pick or mix the color they have in mind with her brush and put it right where it belongs. And it stays there. I never worked like that. I know I could, but this is the challenge: should I learn [to paint this way] only because I haven't done it so far? Probably, yes. Widening my repertoire could be good, or it could be a mistake. It could mean running away from the main challenge.

NW In the same way that we're talking about your own work and life, what kind of moment do you think we're in as a culture?

AO It seems like the world is shitty today. Democracy is attacked from all sides. When I talk with my children about problems in the world, I mostly end up telling them that democracy and people voting for the right cause could solve this or that problem. So simple. It's funny that so many years of political awareness led to that.

As a teenager, I was a Maoist. Luckily, I didn't take it too seriously. Now I recognize that many of the strategies, ways of arguing, etc. in the new-right movement are ones that came from the left of that era. It embarrasses me when I think of our mistakes and unfair actions during that time.

There seems to be a great confusion about what's left and right at the moment. That is probably good. In the Seventies long

hair, traveling the world, rock music, drugs and being against the state (or system) would be associated with the left, and law-and-order would belong to the right. With law-and-order Bush Jr., Trump would be in jail. Instead some tattooed individualists storm the capitol. Let's think it over.

NW Do you have hopes for the future?

AO Of course I have hopes.

NW What do you see in the art world that is giving you hope?

AO The art world is very political at the moment. That is good in that it helps us learn. If it helps politically is not clear. It definitely produces some (not all) really bad art and even tries to obstruct some good art.

NW Do you think much about your past? Is it important to you to examine what you've done or to think about the legacy past work might leave?

AO I don't like to think about the past. Sometimes I have to.

EILEEN MYLES

Eileen Myles is a recent addition to my hagiography of working artists. I developed an interest in, then an attraction to, poetry during the pandemic, and *I Must Be Living Twice* was one of the first collections I owned. It stood out to me, because the picture of Myles on the cover in jeans and work shirt felt comfortable and right to me. And now that choice feels mystical as I return to its poems time and time again.

There is something intimate about an artist that opens a new world to you. I had similar experiences with Ornette Coleman and Éliane Radigue as they led me to different ways of hearing. Myles's poems were the first to unlock the rhythm, lightness, and specificity that can hide in the linear progression of words. I read almost everything differently now because of my first experience with those poems, and my readings of the writers I've found since have only benefitted by the education I gained from reading and re-reading *I Must Be Living.*

I was feeling a bit reckless when I wrote to Myles asking them to take part in this issue. I assumed any answer would be a polite (or perhaps not so polite) NO. I thought perhaps they knew I worked with their friend and collaborator Ryan Sawyer, so there might be some niceties, some hemming and hawing—and then, NO. Instead, the response was simple: Myles liked the name of the journal. That was enough. Over the next few weeks, we negotiated timetables and questions, but I found myself paralyzed by possibilities. I was nervous and trashed three versions of my side of the interview after trying to be clumsily rhythmic and poetic in my questions. Instead, I decided the best role would be to set Myles up, and let their answers take on their own hue. The result is fantastic, an interview to be read aloud for the swing and color of its subject's answers.

NW This issue is about how artists work, and where they are as artists, physically and emotionally, when they work. It's apt that the next book of poems you have coming out is titled *Working Life*. Can you give us an idea of what your working life is like right now? Is there a typical day and what does it look like?

EM It's *a "Working Life"*– since I'm a poet I'm really anal about upper case and lower case and punctuation. I just want to insert the thought that I'm not so much thinking about labor as that writing is a kind of modeling of your existence. Like it's a work in progress—more this than the writing itself. The writing is like a guiding fairy.

My days are very unstable and frenetic lately. If I'm in Texas where I live in a house I walk my dog and then I do the first thing

I'm obliged to do. I'm working on a novel at heart but I'm caught professionally between two books, the anthology that I just edited and the new poetry book coming out and then various kinds of travel to like read in festivals and teach and do gigs and make money. A lot of the places I've been before and many of the gigs have to do with friendships and getting to see my friends by showing up and doing a reading. But today I had to send a bio and a picture of me and some contracts to a park in New York that has an art installation and I'll read and talk about the artist in May. I have an intern I'm showing the ropes to because I hate doing that stuff. So I did it and then I wrote them, the intern, about it. Someplace in there my dog got in a fight. I broke it up and she had blood on her mouth. The good news is I wrote a piece last week about a blue face towel I found in the gutter and by now it's washed so I wiped the blood off Honey's face and it gave me a final paragraph for the piece that I quickly wrote. I hoped that wasn't all the writing I'd do today. Maybe this is writing too.

I came back and started picking poems for some readings I'll do in June at the Berlin Poetry festival. The poems will get translated and there's something about the request that doesn't make sense so I wrote Alice Notley who's also doing it and she is also befuddled by the instructions. We went back and forth a little bit and by the end I had confused her even more. I decided I would just do it but then I got stuck. I went into a little shack I have in my yard and I meditated. I decided to do errands before I went back to work. I went to the post office and I mailed three copies of the anthology to people who are in a big event for it in New York in May (Pathetic Happening on May 28th at St. Mark's Church). I keep thinking *this* will get covered when I do my taxes. I emailed my accountant, trying to get a date to do them. I finished choosing the poems and I sent them and I felt good. I figured tonight I would answer your questions and somebody else's. I would probably finish the Walter Mosley novel I'm devouring. He's pretty good. Then unbelievably I drove to the library where I met with a group I meditate with on Tuesdays. With some intermittent chatter we sat and did walking meditation for an hour. It's weird when I was driving to the airport sometime in the past week I listened to Ezra Klein who I'm not sure I like talk with Rick Rubin who I think still lives here even though his house burned down. I was away when that happened. He was talking about meditating and that he does it twice a day. I never or rarely do that so on a day like today I feel like I really hit the bell. The day's not over. I've eaten several meals in all this time I'm describing and I will tell you one more thing, my favorite thing. Once in a while I draw. I started a food diary a couple of days ago. I draw everything I eat. I can't tell you how much

pleasure this gives me. No words only pictures of what is probably unidentifiable food.

NW Most artists can probably recall the feeling of becoming engrossed in writing, music, art, dance, whatever, but I'm not sure all of us can articulate that feeling. Do you remember the first time you wanted to be a poet and what it felt like?

EM It's more like I was one all of a sudden. After college I wrote poems at jobs and at one job in the 70s they had the best IBM selectric and I could write poems at work and I wrote a good one and immediately the realities shifted and the job was unimportant and the poem was the real thing. It's never changed though of course it's been shaken. I go silent sometimes.

NW People with just an acquaintance of your work think of you as a poet, maybe as a political activist, but the breadth of the work you do is so wide. How do you partition yourself during a busy time when you may be working on poems, art writing, photography, film, political work, teaching? Is it a manic all-at-once-as-it-comes, or do you have to set up some system to keep focused on specific work?

EM I ask for deadlines and the world runs on them. But sometimes in the midst of that I just get caught up in taking pictures, or a poem stops everything. Writing novels requires the most attention, but even that if I'm really busy which has been the state of things lately I kind of re-think my novel and decide it requires a lot of little interludes so whenever my mind shifts to that book or something that feels like it I just write right then and there - no preparation. Music is largely an invite. I have a friend in town who designed some sound structure that he wants me to provide some writing for. I said I can't for a couple of days but I might listen when I'm walking my dog and get an idea. I'm devoted to the idea of easiness meaning that I have a lot of work and sometimes the work is distributing it, deciding who else my work might belong to besides me. When I'm writing an essay about an artist I'm wondering if I can slip this in my novel. If someone asks for some writing for a journal I farm out a piece of the novel. Like I make the world be in my cave. I'm never exactly outside of my work. But I'm definitely rocked by the market place. My publisher kind of forced me to publish a poetry book this spring. And it was fun to just throw it together. I knew I *had* the work and I find that my agenda and someone else's are often not that far apart. Music is totally a social thing. Ryan Sawyer very casually invited me to join him and Steve Gunn at a club called the Wicked Lady last summer and now Ryan and I have already made a record. Because it's his world I could just step in which was kind of remarkable. He asked me to do a gig on

April 18 and it just happened to be my release date so my poetry book will have a very unique launch.

Part of it, what I'm trying to describe is a feeling that relationships with other artists and venues kind of beckon and of course I've been scrambling to make a living most of my life so I'll move over there because I think it's all the same practice. I don't partition, that's the thing though I do like to work in different places, for example Texas and New York. I was in Paris for a book launch in September and I added a writing week to the trip and that was great and I'm going to do that somewhere else in June when I'm in Europe.

NW Maybe this is just an attempt at a more specific version of the above, but I'm a big fan of your art writing for its clarity and openness. Your essays feel poetic and they read fast and wild even as they are filled with unique insight. What kind of move do you have to make mentally to go from a poem to writing about Shannon Ebner or Carolee Schneeman?

EM That's the thing. I don't. I put them in my world. Shannon is an old friend so I could write about the way it was in the world when I saw a work of hers on the highline. I like to look at work. It reminds me of a poetry workshop. There was big pressure in the 70s to write about art, or be inspired by it like New York school poets were supposed to be but I thought it was so corny. I liked bands and photography more. But Alice Notley in her workshop at St. Mark's Church put this Jim Dine print on the table and said write about it and I didn't know what that meant but I did and it was like a cartoon story. She made us go to the DeKooning show and we all went to the Joseph Cornell show. But by then I couldn't look at work without writing. It was the form of my excitement. I wrote reviews for about ten years to give myself permission but by the time people were asking me to write catalogue essays I assumed they were inviting me to write as an artist, not an art historian. When I wrote reviews I always wanted to include what I saw on the way to the gallery, or who else was in the room. Once in a while I could do that, but rarely. They wanted me to write about the art. Now I like co-existing with it. If someone's surprised I wonder why they asked me. What did they expect. I definitely was influenced by new journalism when I was in college. Hunter Thompson—and Joan Didion. So I'm doing a poet's version of that for sure. I never write about people unless I love the work. I loved that show of Shannon's. When Moyra Davy asked me to write about a show of hers during the pandemic I just printed out all the photos on my shitty printer and taped them all over my apartment and into the halls of my building. And I had already been writing about

my building that year so I kept doing it with her photos inside it. I like becoming the institution.

NW Your work has such confidence that it would be hard to imagine you having any second thoughts about a poem like "Movie." Have you had periods, or moments, of indecision or anxiety about a certain piece of writing. Or on a broader scale, was there a dark night of the soul at any point where you questioned being the artist you are?

EM Well I suffer rejection like the next one. I wrote plays in the 80s and 90s and even though people liked them I could never get them past one run and I feared they were bad. I'm always thinking like my current novel what if this is just bad. But I like just writing more than not writing. I'm a maximalist. I figure of the percentage I do some part is good. I write a lot of bad poems, and I'm floating in a million bad pieces of this novel. There just is nothing else for me to do. I feel incredibly lucky that I made up this life and it worked. Conviction is repetition, I believe that. I spread myself too thin, I know that's a fact. But if I was somebody else it would probably be lauded. So I decide to *feel* lauded as much as possible. And increasingly I give less of a shit. If I just read and walked my dog for the rest of my life I'd be pretty happy. While drawing everything I ate…

NW Since this is a music journal, I have to ask about your relationship to sound. I have heard you read with drummer Ryan Sawyer, and I just read that you wrote an opera libretto. What is the relationship between your words and the music you like to hear or work with?

EM Ha. I obviously didn't read your questions first. I don't know what that relationship is. I like, I love listening to music and I always wished I played something. So I think my poetry and my prose is definitely infused with sound, a kind of percussion that's personal and I've let it rip more as time has passed, in terms of reading aloud of course…and I have always noticed that tradition in country or rock where someone's talking – Skeeter Davis—why-do-these-eyes-of-mine-cry—I've liked when bands in the past—Japanther? They brought me into the studio and said give us something right there, so I did. But Ryan and I think are in synch and I was a wicked fan of his immediately with his drumming and blues lyrics solos. I invited him to play everywhere I could in my life – I mean my birthday party right before the pandemic and I asked St. Mark's to have him perform on New Year's a few years back and I kind of follow his work so it's great that he's also created these opportunities. We're mutual fans. I wrote a libretto in 2004 with Michael Webster for an opera we called Hell. I thought it was great and we had a bunch of performances and great audiences but no

attention and no further opportunities. Maybe in the future. I always liked opera and Michael turned me on to a lot of composers so I could even understand what a libretto was. I understood that the lyrics conform a bit, meaning if that line has to repeat a bunch to work musically it's fine. I probably needed to ask the music to conform too. With Ryan I have to say when something isn't working but that's rare. I'm supposed to do another libretto with Daniel Fish and Michael Gordon for the LA Opera but it keeps getting pushed into the future. Titus Andronicus. It's so bad, Shakespeare's pot boiler. I will be fun if we do it.

NW This is a bit touchy-feely and speculative, but can you see a certain future for yourself, one that fulfills some need you are feeling now? In your perfect world where would you like to be in thirty years? And what are your hopes for poetry in the future?

EM In 30 years I'll be dead! I still want to direct films. I did a short one and I have another short up my sleeve. I loved writing a screenplay and I wrote a couple of pilots for teevee shows. I have one pilot I really want to see realized. I think it'll happen. For poetry, I guess my dream is I'd like it to become speech and vice versa. I'd like to live in it, I'd like everyone to talk in poetry. I know I do and I'd like to see that be a much more common experience. I'd like to see it turned into the form of communication it already is. I'd even like it to be money.

BRANDON LOPEZ

Brandon Lopez is a worker. He's constantly in motion, a consistent, open thinker. Although we grew up at different times and under different circumstances, we share the same feelings about work and what separates real and valuable work from necessary, but wasted, energy. In the last five years, I've been watching Lopez grind, becoming one of the bassists of choice in New York, and have been happy to see him thrive as his hard work begins to pay off.

As a musician, Lopez is a force of nature. He transcends his instrument's role as the rhythm section's powerplant and forces everyone around him to come up to his level. When we've played in the past, I've delightedly scrambled to ride his wave of sound and density of activity, so as to not be crushed by its force. It's a good feeling, a camaraderie almost, to be in a band with someone there to *work*, to put *work* in, to make it *work*. There is a pride to it, and the music, even when it *doesn't* work, moves forward.

The idea that putting time and energy in and reaping the benefits is an American myth, however. It's not that effort and hope are incompatible, but how we bring them together in our minds—"If I just practice more, things will start to happen"—forgets the frustration, menial occupation, disappointment, and dark nights of the soul that are the byproduct of a life in music. When I received Lopez's answers to these questions, I recognized a lot of my own feelings from the past (and present) in them. These are moments of questioning and uneasiness, even in the midst of—what may seem to an outsider—a successful and productive career.

I asked for this interview because Lopez is at an interesting point in his career and life. It's a moment of precarity I recognize from my own life when, as Anaïs Nin wrote, "…the risk to remain tight in a bud [is] more painful than the risk it [takes] to blossom." Lopez is blossoming in life and in music, and with all of its attendant difficulties.

NW Tell me about your average day. How many things are you doing to keep the money rolling in, and how much time are you able to give over to artistic work that is purely for your own satisfaction?

BL My daytimes need to be regimented considering how strange working in nightlife can be in this city, and how much I'm attracted to that strange nightlife. There's a lot of time spent with personal managerial shit. There's a lot of emails. I practice a lot. Money certainly isn't rolling in, but I've found some way to make it trickle enough to maintain: I take odd jobs; I work part-time; I say yes more than I'd like to. I have to keep up with social media, because I can't afford a publicist, and, for whatever reason, it helps get gigs.

How much time am I able to give over to artistic work purely for my own satisfaction? I don't think this work is ever about personal artistic satisfaction. I mean, I do enjoy when I'm making music, and I try to put myself into situations where I enjoy myself. (If I don't enjoy myself, it won't work out for anyone.) But the idea that I'm putting myself in front of other people for my own personal satisfaction doesn't really track. I don't think we exist in a vacuum. I feel like this work is for people as much as it is for us. But that probably wasn't what you were asking.

NW I know you came up with a specific attitude about work. Can you talk a little bit about growing up? When and how did the bass come into your life?

BL My family came to the US as a direct result of Operation Bootstrap, which ruined the economy of Puerto Rico by importing Puerto Ricans to the US mainland as cheap labor. My mother's family had a few generations of professional musicians on her father's side who happened to be involved in some iconic recordings and bands. My father grew up in the projects in Passaic, NJ and did everything he could to get out and differentiate himself from what was a pretty fucked up situation. He's worked as the superintendent of a cemetery for over thirty years. I worked in the cemetery, on and off, for about fifteen years. It was, and is, hard labor. I learned a lot about humanity and human capital as well as how to deal with hard, thankless work.

As far as learning music and bass, I think—due to the family history with music—my parents were somewhat supportive of my musical pursuits. We were a solid working class family, and thinking of music as a viable pursuit wasn't necessarily the case for the people I grew up around. My parents were able to afford a guitar and lessons when I was about thirteen years old. Once I got the guitar, I couldn't put it down. When I was nineteen, I switched focus to double bass and practiced a lot. I went to, and dropped out of, Berklee and New England Conservatory fairly quickly. I couldn't vibe with student life at that time.

NW By the standards of the New York improvised music scene—being able to play, record, tour—you've been very successful at a young age. But this kind of perception around success exists only on the surface. Over the last few years, what else have you been doing to be able to play as much as you do?

BL What you see versus what it is (and what it took to get to what it is) can be distorted, like most visible optics in this country; it is not necessarily what it is. For years, I worked manual labor by day and played/organized gigs at night. I was nearly homeless, living in a walk-in-closet-sized room for the better part of seven years.

I was a gravedigger, a moving guy, a kitchen worker, a babysitter for entitled transplants. I organized weekly or twice-weekly gigs for years and probably spent more to play than I was ever making. It feels like I'm doing the work of six people to maybe scrape by. I don't think it's easy to see the difficulties and the sacrifices some of us have to make to do the work.

That being said, I do get to enjoy myself, and the musical work is mostly fulfilling in spite of whatever circumstances I've dealt with. Right now things are somehow working out, though I'm not sure how long it'll be that way. The "industry" or the infrastructure for this music is and has been in a constant state of flux. What and who it deems programmable is a pretty ridiculous and fickle thing, and it's obviously not tied to artistic merit or originality. When and from where the money comes is a mystery. I don't think I'm so concerned with relevancy or following trends, but sometimes you're forced to deal with some shit in order to work.

NW I've been asking this of almost everyone. It's a little thought experiment. I want you to think thirty years down the road; it's a utopian version of the future with the best possible circumstances for you, your career, your family, our culture. What do you see? How are you working? How is the world around you?

BL I'd love to see a democratization and dissemination of information and access. Right now, It feels like I'm surrounded by a generation who have parents who could foot the bill. Don't you think that kind of cloistering of information drastically cuts back the amount of creative work that could benefit society at large?

I'm also genuinely uninterested and/or disturbed by what the middle and upper class wants or has to say. If the current socio-political structure benefits you, it's hard to offer any real criticism. I think that's central to great work: a rigorous critique of imposed social hierarchies. I don't necessarily mean work that does that in a didactic and obvious way. I think a lot of "political" art or music I've seen (or unfortunately been a part of) has been more signaling that reinforces the divisive aspects of the neo-liberal co-opting of identity politics. I think we need to offer and be open to hard critique of our work and personal politics. And if we come from or obtain a position of power, we need to do what we can to uplift people around us and level the playing field. Working for yourself or your small circle of friends doesn't benefit anyone. Playing a system so it massively benefits you at the expense of a majority is pretty fucking bad.

About my idea of the future… I don't know what my future looks like, I'm not sure if it'll be there. I'm just trying to be present and deal with what's happening now!

MICHAEL RANTA

In 1967 percussionist Michael Ranta left the United States and never came back. In the ensuing fifty years, he amassed a vast and singular body of work in composition, improvisation, and electronics. He collaborated with some of the most significant composers of the twentieth century including Harry Partch, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Helmut Lachenmann, Toru Takemitsu, and Luc Ferrari. In 1979, after over a decade of travels across Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, he settled in Köln and opened Asian Sound, purveyors of unusual and hard-to-find non-Western percussion instruments, which he still operates today.

Ranta's music is multifaceted and resists concise summary. It presents an alternative to the volume, virtuosity, and rhythmic regularity of most percussion music. Rather, his music employs patience, mindfulness, grace, and, above all, a profound affection for the instruments, their sounds, and the world from which they came. His work embraces the physicality of percussion playing, its ability to form pathways between our minds and bodies, and its connection to our ancient roots. In March 2022 percussionist and composer Sarah Hennies and Swiss writer and composer Vincent de Roguin spoke to Michael Ranta in hopes of shedding light on his fascinating life in music.

- Sarah Hennies and Vincent de Roguin

SH You were born in Duluth, Minnesota. The earliest thing that I really know about you musically is that you attended the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. there anything prior to becoming, for lack of a better term, "a classical percussionist", that you would like to tell us or that you think is interesting?

MR Well, how I got close to drums, maybe? My father was a freemason, and they met once a week and had a drum and bugle corps, for the 4th of July or for the Victory over Japan parade, whenever there was a parade. And my father brought the drum home after the practice, so it sat around. When I was in fifth or sixth grade—maybe already junior high school—I would start to play on the drum, and I got interested. Back then in Minnesota, the winter started on the third week of October, and the snow that would get up to your waist; it wouldn't melt until the end of April. There was a lot of time to just sit home, and in the 1950s NBC often put the New York Philharmonic with Leonard Bernstein conducting on television, and I was fascinated. It grabbed me. Duluth, Minnesota was a city of a 110, 000 people. It was just across water from Superior, Wisconsin, and together they had the Duluth Superior Symphony Orchestra. Of course, it was all amateur, and they only had one concert a year, but[1] I joined that.

The percussion teacher in Duluth was okay—he wasn't bad—but I knew I would have to get out of Duluth if I was to follow my dreams. The big turning point was after high school graduation in 1960. I went to Interlochen Summer Music Camp, and that changed everything. The teacher there was Jack McKenziei, who taught at the University of Illinois. I was very happy studying with him; he changed everything around for me. Sometime in the second or third week of August, just before the Interlochen days were over, Jack said, "By the way, Mike, where are you going for university?" And I said, "Oh, I don't know." "What? You don't know? But school starts in three or four weeks!" (*laughs*) I said, "Okay, what about coming to you at UIUC?" And so I went there in 1961.

VdR You have composed many tape works throughout your life. Did this interest start at UIUC?

MR Yeah. A friend had the key to the electronic music studio, so we went there and played around with the tape recorders: making sounds, sine tones, and altering them. I learned a little bit there but was not greatly interested. I was more interested in performance then. My interest in composing *musique concrète* came later, in the early 1970s.

VdR Did you pursue other studies around that time?

MR Yes, and even then I wanted the best. The story I'm going to tell, it almost makes me start crying. I took the greyhound bus to New York City in 1961, and at the time, for eighty or eighty-five cents you could get [tickets] to the fifth or sixth floor of the Metropolitan Opera, standing. I went to a Wagner opera, and I could see the timpanist. I said, "That's what I need! That's exactly what I need!" So, I went down to the exit, and I waited outside the door until the timpanist came out. His name was Richard Horowitz. I said, "I'd like to study timpani with you." And he says [*with heavy New York accent*] "What? Kid, I haven't got time..." I probably looked like I was about to start crying so he said, "Okay, come tomorrow at ten o'clock." The next morning, I went there with my timpani mallets. We took an old elevator up to the fifth floor and I showed him my tremolo on timpani. He just shook his head and said, "No." (*laughs*)

VdR Is it around that time that you visited Edgard Varèse?

MR Yes. Interesting how that happened: In the summer of 1961, I was in the student orchestra of the Pierre Monteux School for Conductors and Orchestra Musicians in Hancock, Maine. I got to know one of the conducting students there—Carlos Rausch from Argentina—who knew Mauricio Kagel well when they were both younger. Sometime later, I met Carlos again in New York City and told him how impressed I was with *Ionisation* and *Déserts*, both of which I performed at UIUC. Carlos said, "Call Varèse, here's his

phone number." I was only a twenty-year-old kid, but Carlos was insistent. I called Varèse, and he invited me for morning coffee at his apartment in Greenwich Village. When I told him I had performed two of his pieces at UIUC he got very excited and shouted, "My publisher never informed me about this! Where was it?" "University of Illinois," He didn't seem to understand and asked the question twice. He then repeated many times that New York City was the only place for music in the USA, nowhere else, and, as a musician, one had to live in New York City. We went on to have some small talk about various things before he showed me one of his gongs, saying, "I found it on the street in Paris, a dog was urinating on it." After about two hours, Varèse told me, "Get in touch with me after you move to NYC, the only place for music in this country." I believe he passed away one or two years later.

VdR What were your first professional experiences as a percussionist?

MR I was dealing with a collapsed lung in 1962 and 1963, and I had to drop out of the fall semester at UIUC. I only came back there in 1965 to finish my studies. In the meantime, a friend told me about a small North Carolina Symphony orchestra and that I should ask if they had a place for me. And they did! The orchestra started around the fifteenth of January and played to around the tenth of April in all the small cities in North Carolina. It was just a chamber orchestra, twenty-one players including harp, one percussionist, and timpanist. That's when my experience as a player started.

Between my time in New York City and the North Carolina Symphony, I was able to have a six-week season with a full-size orchestra. I got a room and three meals a day for playing in that orchestra in Hancock. It was great and I gathered a lot of experience there. Anyway, after John Crosby heard that I played in the Pierre Monteux orchestra without any audition, he just said, "The second percussion is open in the Santa Fe Opera for the summer season. Do you want it?" I said, "Yes!" I stayed with the Santa Fe Opera for five summers, which was very nice. I was twenty or twenty-one years old and playing a lot of modern [repertoire]: Shostakovich's *Die Nase*, Hindemith and many others. Also, every summer the Santa Fe Opera did a Hans-Werner Henze opera (*laughs*) Playing outdoors, looking up at the night sky was nice, and the dry climate of New Mexico was good for my health.

VdR How did you meet Harry Partch?

MR I started working with him in the fall of 1960. Partch had been [at UIUC] since 1957, I think. When I got to UIUC, there was an introductory meeting. Jack McKenzie said, "Mark your calendars, every Thursday nights at seven o'clock is reserved for Partch

rehearsals!" I leaned over and whispered to my neighbor, "Partch, what is that? Something to eat?" (*laughs*) McKenzie said, "Harry Partch; you'll see what this is about on Thursday night. Here's the address, be there!" Harry was a living in Champaign, IL so I rode my bicycle there and all the other percussionists who were involved were there too. Harry said, "Look around, whatever instrument is attractive to you, that's the one you'll be playing." I picked the Boo [*Bamboo Marimba*]. We were quite busy in the fall of 1960, because the premiere of *Revelation in the Courthouse Park* was in January or February 1961. Later in 1961 I played in *Rotate the Body in All Its Planes* and *Bless This Home*. At the end of the year, we started rehearsals for his next piece *Water, Water*, in which I had a big solo part performing on the surrogate kithara, a small string instrument on wheels, which the performer can move around the stage while playing.

VdR Although Partch eventually left UIUC you continued working with him for many years after that.

MR Yes. In 1962, Partch's grant ran out at UIUC, so he packed everything and moved to a chicken hatchery in Petaluma, California. I didn't see him until I departed from the New Orleans Philharmonic, (after one season the conductor came to me and said, "I heard you didn't sign a contract for next year!" I said, "No, I'm going to Petaluma, California, to work with Harry Partch.") in April 1964. I drove all the way up to Petaluma with a stop in Oklahoma where my old University of Illinois comrade, Danlee Mitchell,[2] was in an orchestra. In Petaluma, Partch and I mostly practiced for his piece *And on the Seventh Day Petals Fell in Petaluma*. Mitchell and I recorded it, but the recording had some problems.

In the summer of 1964, Partch moved out to San Diego, and I worked with him at San Diego State University. He was promised a grant from the University of California-San Diego, but it didn't happen. After San Diego, there was Venice, California, where I stayed with Partch for a while. We played a concert up the mountains north of Los Angeles around that time and that's when I thought, "That's it Mike, go back to Illinois and finish your bachelor's degree!" So, I did that and moved to Europe in 1967.

VdR I've read somewhere that you played with Partch until 1968.

MR That's because, some months after moving to Europe, Mitchell wrote me: "There's going to be a concert, and after the concert, there'll be a recording of many Partch pieces for an LP release. Do you want to participate? You'll have to stay for six weeks in Venice, California for rehearsals with the ensemble. You can sleep in Harry's apartment there. Then we'll all fly to New York City to the Whitney Museum for a live performance."

The concert was completely full. Lou Harrison was there and, I believe, Aaron Copland, too. The concert finished around eleven o'clock, and they made some very strong coffee. From eleven-thirty to about six in the morning we recorded that LP.[3] That was my last meeting with Partch; a day or two later I was flying back to Europe.

VdR How did these years alongside Partch affect you as a musician? What sort of relationship did you have with him, besides playing together?

MR Well, with Partch your ears changed a lot because of his microtonal scales. I also learned to repair his instruments, but only when he showed me how! (*laughs*) I was his assistant. He showed me what he needed, and then I helped. There wasn't anything really creative from my side; it was really about helping him, repairing the instruments, packing them, and then, of course, rehearsing and recording. It was also through Partch that I met Emil Richards,[4] who was in his ensemble. I drove up every three weeks from San Diego to his studio in Hollywood for mallet lessons, and my marimba and vibraphone playing improved so much after studying with him! He put quarters on my wrists, and I had to play the marimba rapidly and not let the quarters fall down.

Once, on my way to a lesson with Emil, my tire blew up. By the time I had changed it and got to his studio, he was already gone. He had left for a recording session with Frank Sinatra! I was supposed to go with him, but I missed my chance that day! (*laughs*)

SH So, in 1967, you moved to Germany and immediately started working with Helmut Lachenmann and Mauricio Kagel, among others. Did you have experience as a percussionist in new music chamber groups before moving there?

MR Oh yes, the contemporary chamber players at the University of Illinois. That changed my whole life. There were ten or eleven players, and in August 1966 we went on a five-concert tour in Europe. Starting at the Darmstadt festival, we played pieces by my teachers at University of Illinois: Salvatore Martirano, Lejaren Hiller, Herbert Brün and a few others. We were a bit booed out by the Darmstadt audience as they were primarily Stockhausen lovers. Stockhausen himself got up and left the concert in the middle of the Martirano piece, and all his students got up and left with him. (*laughs*)

Lejaren Hiller arranged the tour, and he had good connections in Europe. After Darmstadt, we came to Köln. And after a three-week pause, we got to Warsaw for the Autumn Festival, then to the American Center in Paris and on to London at Wigmore Hall. So, after that experience in Europe, I thought, "Ha, this is for me, I'm going to move here." (*laughs*)

VdR You also made some important connections on that tour.

MR When we played in Darmstadt, a guy came up to me—very shy, with glasses—and he gave me a score. He said, "This is for solo percussion, I just finished it;" the score was *Intérieur 1* by Helmut Lachenmann. I replied, "Thank you very much," and just put the score in my luggage. Then, one year later in Santa Fe, the house I was staying in had a room big enough for a four-octave marimba, a vibraphone, a set of tom-toms, and a set of tam-tams, all borrowed from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. I was then able to make the setup for *Intérieur 1* and play it. I wrote back to Helmut to tell him, and when I arrived in Europe in the fall of 1967, I was ready for the performances he had organized. There were four pieces on the program, *Intérieur 1* for solo percussion; a piece for solo percussion and large orchestra, which the Sinfonie-Orchester des Hessischen Rundfunks premiered with Lukas Foss conducting; *Trio Fluido* for marimba, viola, and clarinet; and, finally, there was a piece for chorus and four percussionists, which was premiered in Bremen. I was involved in all the productions of those four pieces.

VdR From this early collaboration with Lachenmann, your professional life rapidly flourished in Europe.

MR Yes, aside from Lachenmann, there was work with Nicolaus A. Huber and Martin Guembel in Stuttgart. I was also around Europe with Josef Anton Riedl in those years. He was quite eccentric; his music was mostly improvised, and I don't think he wrote more than one or two scores in his life.

But to be a professional player in Europe, I had to own my own instruments. I mentioned earlier that all percussion majors at University of Illinois had a key to the percussion storage, and since I had a key it was no problem to take out the two timpani, put them in my old Buick, put on the shirt and tie, play the concert, and bring the timpani back. When I came to Europe, no student percussionist at the conservatory in Munich had the key to the storage room! (*laughs*) When we had to practice *Trio Fluido*, the Bavarian Radio said, "Well, Mr. Lachenmann, we'll make a compromise. We'll bring the marimba to a small room, and you can have a rehearsal there, but the marimba cannot leave the building!" So, once I was in Europe, there was no way around this. I had to own my own marimba, vibraphone, glockenspiel. That's why my first years in Europe were really poor for me: all the money I was being paid for concerts had to go to buying these instruments.

VdR How did the recordings you made with Conny Plank at that period come about? There are the so-called *Wired* sessions[5] from April 1970, with Plank, Mike Lewis, and Karl-

Heinz Böttner. And the *Mu* sessions,[6] with only Lewis and Plank, which were recorded in late December 1970.

MR I met Conny in a concert for the West German Radio, I think in Bonn. I was involved in the production of a Mauricio Kagel piece with two guitarists—Böttner and Wilhelm Bruck—and Plank was the *tonmeister.* At that time, he was still in Hamburg and had not yet opened his studio near Köln. We became friends and decided to carry onwards and work on other things together. One day I went up to Hamburg to record something with him, Böttner and Lewis. Of course, we would all loosen up with marijuana and hash and say, "Let's have a session." In the early 1980s, when Plank had moved outside of Köln, I would go out and work there together with him. At his studio, I also recorded sessions that ended on my LP, *MU V / MU VI.*[7]

SH Soon after the last session with Plank and Lewis, you started working with Stockhausen. How did you meet him?

MR I did a very clever thing, and I had no idea at the time how clever (*laughs*). I had my bachelor's recital at UIUC in 1966, and all student recitals were recorded. For my bachelor's recital, I played Stockhausen's *Zyklus*. I sent him this tape, and he was apparently impressed by my recording enough to write back to me in Munich, where I was then living with Helmut Lachenmann. In the letter he criticized many things in my interpretation, but at the same time he said that many other things were great.

Years later, I was living in a hippie commune in Peterskirchen, Bavaria, with Paul and Limpe Fuchs and all kind of strange people (*laughs*). Vera Gräfin von Lehndorff had a big house, and she liked having artists staying there. The rent was very reasonabl,e but there was only one telephone down on the ground floor, and I was living on the second floor. One day someone shouted, (*mimicking really stoned voice*) "Miiiike! Telephone for you. Karlheinz Stockhausen is on the line." (*laughs*) Stockhausen said, "Hello Michael, I'd like to invite you to Expo '70 to play *Zyklus*, *Kontakte* and *Aus den sieben Tagen*." He had this invitation from the West German government to represent Germany at the universal exposition in Osaka, Japan. So, I played *Zyklus* twice a day for six months—maybe 130 times! I also played *Kontakte* twice at night along with a very free version of *Aus den sieben Tagen* with our team. There were maybe twelve or fifteen players and six members of the vocal ensemble. The schedule started at three in the afternoon until six, when we had a short break for dinner, and the concert started at seven. At the end of the evening, a bus brought us back to Kyoto to our hotel at around ten. It was very well organized.

VdR How does it feel to play the same piece twice a day for six months?

MR (*laughs*) First of all, *Zyklus* is always different. It's a graphic score, and although you have to play through the twelve pages of the score, you can start on any page and end on the page before that one. So, I played it differently every day. *Kontakte*, however, was a little bit difficult. At the time, I was in love with the French school of *musique concrète*. I still am. Near the end of *Kontakte* there are these "wave tones" (*imitating swirling pitches going in all directions*), which are just pitches twirling around on the machine. I couldn't stand it, but I had to play. I thought, "It's not my way, but I have to do it."

It got to be routine; it was my job to do it, and that job gave me an opportunity to be in Japan. The country attracted me very much. When I got back to Europe after the six months ended, I was careful not to book anything after New Year 1970. A few days after New Year's Day, I got on a plane and returned to Japan because I was so interested. I had also met Tōru Takemitsu in Osaka, who had come to watch and hear what was going on at the German pavilion. We got to know each other then, and he invited me to perform a concert at the Steel Pavilion at Expo 70, where he was in charge of the music programs. When I returned to Japan, I did much work and many recordings with him. Even after I moved to Taiwan, from 1972 to 1979, I came back to Japan very often. I often played Takemitsu's music alongside Yasunori Yamaguchi and Stomu Yamash'ta, who was my twelfth-grade student at the Interlochen Arts Academy in the winter months of 1965–66.

SH In January 1971, you settled in Japan for some time. There, you continued to work as an interpreter for Takemitsu and others, but also engaged in composing your own music at the electronic music studios at NHK while improvising with a range of other musicians.

MR At Expo '70 in Osaka, I had met an American guy, Joseph Deisher. He came to the German pavilion once and asked if people would be interested in learning T'ai chi ch'üan. A few people said yes. So, we took lessons from Joseph during breaks between performances of Stockhausen's music, and that interested me a lot. That's also why I wanted to come back to Japan.

Joseph Deisher lived in Tokyo, not Osaka. I rented a small apartment in Tokyo, and every morning I went to a T'ai chi ch'üan class taught by a Chinese teacher, a former Chiang Kai-shek soldier. Then one day this Chinese woman came to us, and she jabbered in Japanese, "I see what you're doing, but that is a Chinese art not a Japanese art. You're just doing a copy of it!" She invited me over to her house, and we got to know each other. She said, "My family has a large house in Taipei. There's extra rooms upstairs. You can go there and learn T'ai chi ch'üan at the source!" So, I moved to

Taipei in the fall of 1972. I was introduced to the class in the morning, and there were a hundred people practicing in a large space next to a Buddhist temple near the center of Taipei! If you listen to my piece, *China Filch*,[8] there's a recording in there of the teacher calling out movements.

This changed everything for me. Waking up at 5:15 in the morning, taking T'ai chi ch'üan, sword dance and Qigong lessons and going to university in the afternoon where I took mandarin lessons. Over time, I started lecturing in music history and percussion at several music colleges and eventually became professor of music at the Hwa Kang Arts School. But, like I mentioned, I travelled many times back to Japan, working for concerts or recordings with composers like Takemitsu, Joji Yuasa, Saburō Moroi, Takehisa Kosugi, Toshi Ichiyanagi and many others. With the money I made from performances or recordings in Japan, I could live for a month or two in Taiwan (*laughs*). I travelled to Korea as well, working with Kang Sukhi and doing modern music improvisation with other players.

Towards the end of my time in Asia, I did a series of radio broadcasts for the WDR—programs on contemporary music in Thailand, Hong-Kong, Korea, the Philippines and of course Taiwan—traveling to all these places, doing interviews and portraits of composers.

VdR During all those years living in Asia, you travelled quite a lot, for instance meeting Hartmut Geerken in Cairo and starting a collaboration with him under the name The Heliopolar Egg.[9] I was wondering if all the audio material that has been issued on records in the last ten years came from Geerken's archive. Is it all from the same tour?

MR Harmut had everything, he had the time to do it and he was in contact with people for the releases. Harmut and I went on a sixteen-concert tour at the end of 1976, beginning in Tehran, ending in Osaka, and playing at most of the German cultural institutes in between. We were traveling for about three weeks and Hartmut had a tape recorder and recorded those concerts partway.

SH And how did you actually meet Hartmut?

MR When I came back from my yearlong stay in Asia I stopped in Cairo to see an Egyptian friend, Omar El-Hakim, who I knew from my days in Tokyo. He said, "I want to introduce you an interesting musician," and he took me over to Geerken's house. We immediately became friends. The room was full of percussion instruments he had collected—all kinds of drums and gongs. Hartmut was a German teacher at the Goethe Institute, and he spent most of his life abroad. After Cairo he was transferred to Kabul, so I went there to stay with him at his house for almost six months.

Then he was off to Lebanon, then Athens, until his retirement. He was a German teacher but always with a strong love for creating his own music and issuing music of others.

SH With Geerken, you're playing in places—I hope this is accurate to say—that unusual music often doesn't reach, especially at that time. Do you have any stories of what that was like?

MR Well, our first concert was in Cairo in 1972 where we'd got a good audience because of Hartmut. The Egyptians were kind of open to this new music anyway. In Tehran, it seemed nobody was really acquainted with modern music. but the Goethe Institute had a big name—it was the German cultural institute—so people would go to the concerts. And they'd maybe say, "Oh, we've never heard music like this before," but nobody booed us out, at least not in Tehran! Then we played for three days in Delhi. The Indian audience was very quiet and meditative; they would just sit there. We had asked the Goethe Institute to supply local musicians to improvise with us as much as possible, but in Tehran and Delhi there were no guest players. We played in Calcutta, and that was good, although the Indian group that the Goethe Institute had arranged to improvise with us ended up playing straight classical Indian music (*laughs*). But it was ok!

Then we played in Bangladesh, and that's where people got up and shouted at us, "That's no music! That's just junk sounds!" (*laughs*) Then onward to Bangkok. Good and quiet audience, they liked the concert. The famous Bruce Gaston[10] came and played together with us. I had met him in Thailand previously. We played Manila after that, where people weren't so accustomed to modern music. Then we travelled to Korea where composers had been studying in the West, so the audience was very much acquainted with this kind of new music. Kang Sukhi and Hwang Byungki performed together with us, playing the Korean kayagum.[11] And of course, the final concert in Osaka. That was the most educated audience for this music. Ichiyanagi and Kosugi joined us that evening, and we also played my wife Shoko Shida's piece, *Lonely Mountain* for piano and percussion.[12]

SH While in Taiwan, you made several tape compositions. Can you say something about your compositional process and how you made artistic decisions in these unusual electroacoustic pieces like *China Filch* (1973)?

MR The first piece on the *Taiwan Years* CD (Metaphon, 2021), *Kagaku Henka*, was made entirely at the electronic music studio of NHK in Tokyo in 1971 at the invitation of Takemitsu. Even though it was made in Japan, I included because I was already living in Taiwan at that time. *China Filch* was constructed from scraps of var-

ious recordings I made, running around with my little battery operated reel-to-reel tape recorder. There's a marching band on the streets in Taipei, nature sounds, whatever. I mixed that in a studio in Taipei that, of course, wasn't as professional as the NHK studio in Tokyo, but it worked. The third piece, *At Night*, was the music for a ballet piece by Lin Huai-Min for his dance group, the Cloud-Gate Dance Ensemble. Again, I worked in the simple studio in Taipei, put all the sounds together, made a master tape, and gave it to him. That was it. I'm not sure Lin Huai-Min ever used the music. This piece was made in 1978, close to the time I departed Taiwan.

SH We should also talk about your collaboration with Jean-Claude Éloy, as he's an important part of your musical life. Your first piece together was the three-and-a-half-hour *Yo-In* in 1980.

MR Yes, the most important. When I first met Éloy, I felt that we were totally brothers, because my style of composition—*musique concrète*, recording sounds of nature and altering them in the studio—were so close to his. He felt that way, too, and we got along wonderfully. We rehearsed *Yo-In* for about a month here in my studio in Köln. We then played every night for a week at the *Musée d'Art Moderne* in Paris. Iannis Xenakis came four nights in a row. He said, "Your piece is beautiful; it's wonderful, but I'm not going to stay here for three hours and forty minutes! I'll come tonight for the first act, tomorrow for the second, and so on." (*laughs*) Olivier Messiaen was also there. It was very successful, a big opening for Jean-Claude. We played it in Liege, Amsterdam, Köln, Bordeaux, Paris, Avignon, Japan, Strasbourg, and Warsaw. Since *Yo-In* worked out really well, we worked on another piece together, *Anâhata*,[13] which we performed in Bordeaux, Geneva, Paris, and Warsaw.

SH How much was *Yo-In* a collaboration between the two of you as far as the percussion part being written?

MR Ah, very interesting. The percussion part was not written. Jean-Claude described what he wanted me to do. When I did it, he said, "No, play more of the deep bells and gradually remove the high ones," and things like that. We worked on the piece for weeks; we would do one act, and then I would clear out everything and set up for the second act. That's how we did it. A performance of *Yo-In* involved only three people. There was Éloy at the mixing board with microphones everywhere, mixing and changing the sound live; I was playing the percussion, of course; and the third one was the lighting designer. It was a theatrical performance, and I had to change costume for each of the four acts.

SH All in all, what has been your favorite music to play?

MR As a player, I always looked forward to working with complicated and challenging percussion sounds and structure. But af-

ter my seventieth birthday, I knew that I no longer had the speed and virtuosity to keep up with the younger generation of percussionists. I could live with that. No problem. What disappoints me somewhat is the trend towards mostly loud and frenetic music in all instrumental and vocal areas, not just percussion. I wish that quiet and meditative music was more popular.

SH Having heard and read about your huge variety of activities throughout your life, you strike me has someone who followed the whim of doing the thing you felt like doing at any moment.

MR Yeah, pretty much. I always looked for adventure.

1 Jack McKenzie (1930) is Dean Emeritus of the College of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois.
2 Danlee Mitchell (1936-), professor emeritus of percussion at San Diego State University and served as Partch's assistant from 1958 until Partch's death in 1974
3 *The World of Harry Partch*, Columbia Masterworks, 1969
4 Emil Richards (1932-2019), prolific vibraphonist and percussionist who performed and recorded extensively in jazz and pop music
5 Released as New Phonic Art 1973 / Iskra 1903 / Wired, *Free Improvisation*, Deutsche Grammophon, 1974.
6 Released as Ranta / Lewis / Plank, *Mu*, Metaphon, 2010
7 Michael Ranta, *MU V / MU VI*, Asian Sound Records, 1984
8 Recorded 1975, released on Michael Ranta, *Taiwan Years*, Metaphon, 2021.
9 Named after the Heliopolis district in Cairo
10 Bruce Gaston (1946-2021), a transplanted Californian who helped revolutionize Thai classical music by injecting it with Western instruments and forms, and who became one of Thailand's leading performers and composers. He was a prominent and respected figure in Thailand as a composer, performer, and teacher.
11 The gayageum or kayagum is a traditional Korean plucked zither with 12 strings, though some more recent variants have 18, 21 or 25 strings.
12 Released in Hartmut Geerken, *The Osaka Fear Ear*, R. Ling Press, 1986 and in Hartmut Geerken / Michael Ranta, *The Heliopolar Egg*, Qbico, 2010
13 Premiered in November 1986 as part of a coproduction between the Paris Autumn Festival, the Bordeaux Sigma Festival, and the ensemble Contrechamps in Geneva.

THE LIVING COLLECTION: OPEN EDITION

Composer: Lesley Mok

Originally based on the parlor game *Consequences*, in which texts were assembled by guests without seeing (due to creative folding) what previously was written, *exquisite corpse* became an important source of collaboration and creative experimentation for surrealist writers and artists such as André Breton, Joan Miró, Tristan Tzara, and Marcel Duchamp. These artists used a form of the game as a way of assembling visual and textual ideas into a form that they could not have foreseen and, therefore, had very little control over. Some of the results were astounding, others less so. Every result, however, was something new.

Sound American's version of *exquisite corpse* adds a few twists in keeping with our milieu and mission. Each cycle, three composers will collaborate on a short work specifically for *SA*, to be published in that cycle's journals. One artist will go first, passing on a set of information to the next, who, in turn, will add, subtract, and change that information to create a new version of the piece before passing it on to the third, who will create a "final" take on the composition. The readers of *Sound American* will get to watch the whole process as it occurs as each version will be reproduced in subsequent issues.

This round of *exquisite corpse* is brought to a close with a new piece by New York–based composer and percussionist Lesley *The Living Collection: Open Edition* begins our next round by asking the performer to bring their imagination to the physical body and the world around it.

Imagine one of those half exercise balls. If you stand with your feet together in the middle, you can achieve a balance that keeps the ball from tipping over. You can do the same by placing your feet on either side, but that's not always the case—if you put most of your weight on one foot, the ball still may tip over. The opposite is also true: placing both feet on one edge of the ball doesn't necessarily mean the ball will tip. That is, your body will have to lean away from your feet so that the weight of your torso offsets the weight of your lower body.

In *The Living Collection: Open Edition*, each improviser is asked to participate with equal force and weight, learning to find a center within multiple relationships, and opening up the possibility for multiple perspectives to evolve over time. The Modules are purposefully designed using a simple musical parameter: a pitch set, a texture, a rhythmic idea, a word, or an image, so that all unspecified parameters are left open for interpretation. My hope is that these structured parameters actually give freedom to an ensemble, and allow them to make choices in the music that speak to the weight of each idea and its counterbalance, which should naturally shift in tandem to maintain an equilibrium.

In a biological ecosystem, there exists a complex network in which different organisms are linked together through nutrient cycles and energy flow. In *Living Collection: Open Edition*, new ideas may emerge, while at other times they decompose, but all should function together in synergistic and vibrant ways. In assembling an ensemble, think about creating an environment that is dynamic—one that surprises you and makes you ask "what if?" at each turn. This might mean collaborating with musicians whose instincts challenge your own logic. This juxtaposition of ideas might feel strange, but it might also force a new kind of engagement, one that supersedes an aesthetic cohesion and is as diverse as the ecosystem we live in.

Key:

1 An ensemble can be of any size and any instrumentation.

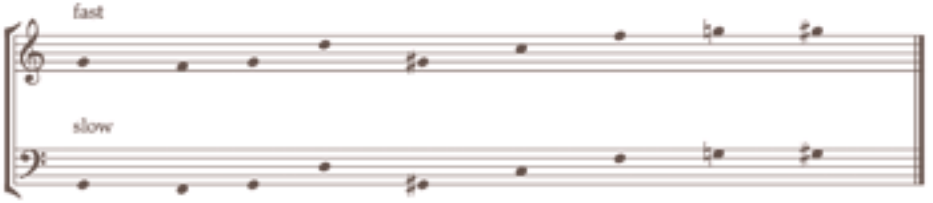
2 Any number of improvisers can decide to play a module and any number of modules can be played at the same time. Modules that are instrument-specific are specified.

3 Any parameter that is not notated is open to interpretation and their unique expression is encouraged. This can include key signature, meter, rhythm, dynamics, articulation, module duration, and so on.

4 Assign at least one person and no more than 1/3 of the ensemble to be a Free Agent to improvise freely.

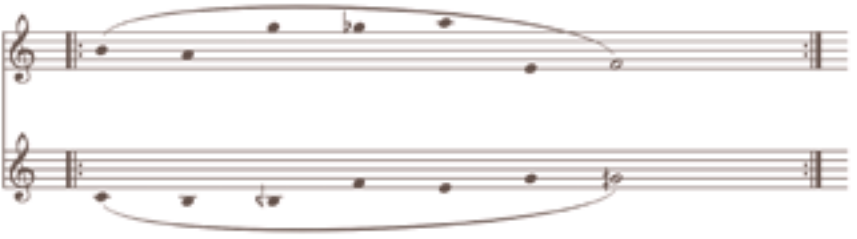
M1

Improvise within Pitch Set; the speeds at which you improvise should be vastly different

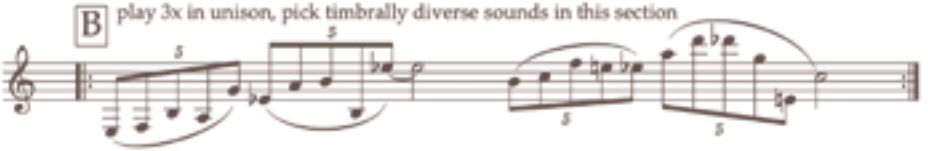


M2

A *energetic*
OPEN
start slurred, gradually add different articulations
develop intervallicly



B play 3x in unison, pick timbrally diverse sounds in this section



M3

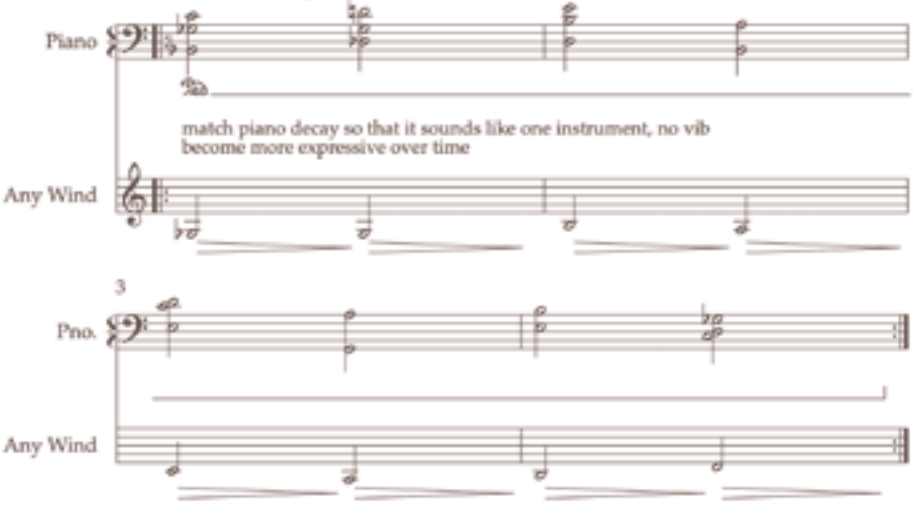
M4

For brass and string instruments and voice
shimmering harmonics, let pitched notes escape at times

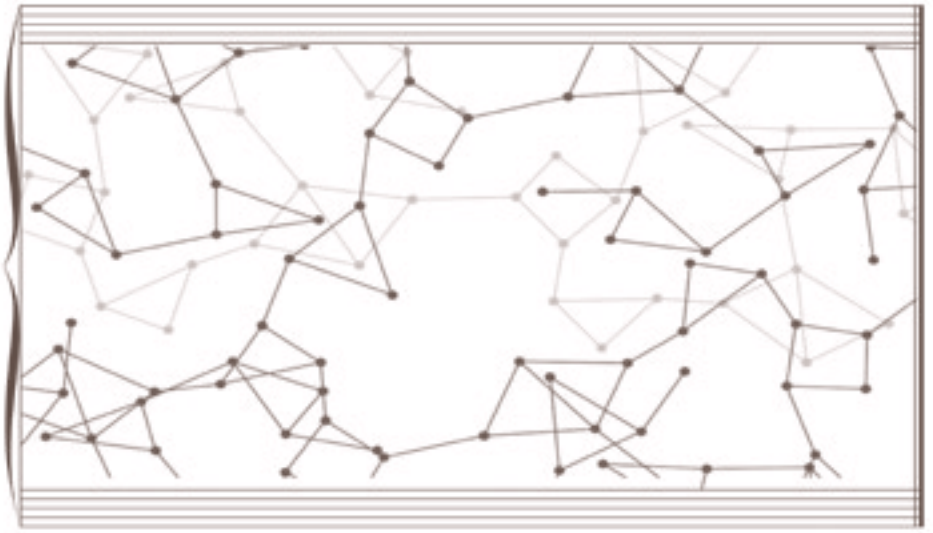
M5

CONCERT

For piano and any wind instrument
start slow and get even slower

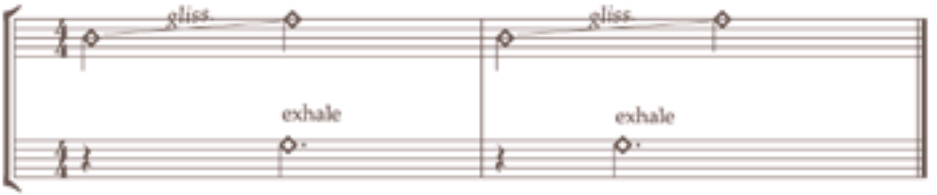


M6



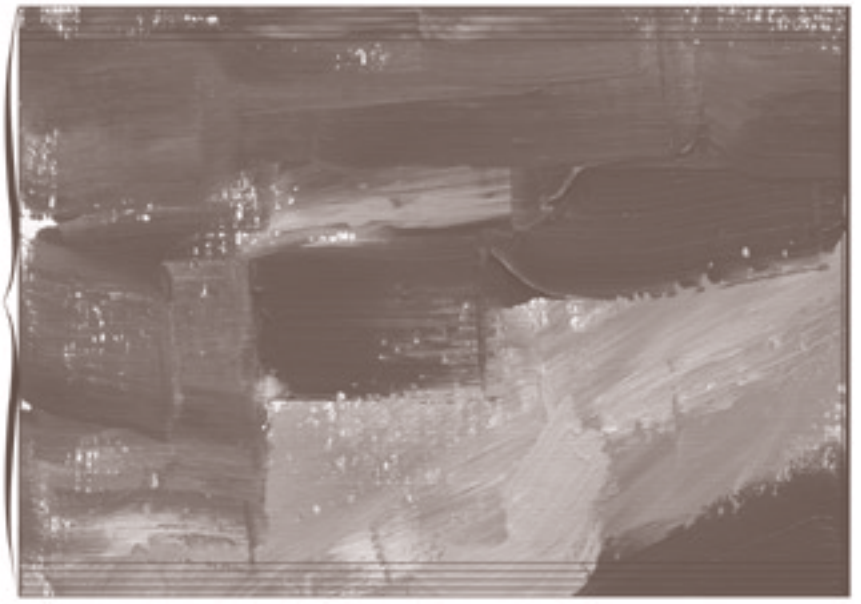
M7

extremely gradual and even, like a kettle going off



M8

M9



M10

promises, pleiades, psalters, plane-trees,

NICO MUHLY

Nico Muhly, born in 1981, is an American composer who writes orchestral music, works for the stage, chamber music and sacred music. He's received commissions from The Metropolitan Opera: *Two Boys* (2011), and *Marnie* (2018); Carnegie Hall, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, The Australian Chamber Orchestra, the Tallis Scholars, and King's College, Cambridge, among others. He is a collaborative partner at the San Francisco Symphony and has been featured at the Barbican and the Philharmonie de Paris as composer, performer, and curator. An avid collaborator, he has worked with choreographers Benjamin Millepied at the Paris Opéra Ballet, Bobbi Jene Smith at the Juilliard School, Justin Peck and Kyle Abraham at New York City Ballet; artists Sufjan Stevens, The National, Teitur, Anohni, James Blake and Paul Simon. His work for film includes scores for *The Reader* (2008) and *Kill Your Darlings* (2013), and the BBC adaptation of *Howards End* (2017). Recordings of his works have been released by Decca and Nonesuch, and he is part of the artist-run record label Bedroom Community, which released his first two albums, *Speaks Volumes* (2006) and *Mothertongue* (2008).

ELLEN FULLMAN

For over four decades, Ellen Fullman has maintained a singular focus on her project, The Long String Instrument, an installation of dozens of tuned strings fifty feet or more in length which have resonated architectural spaces in festivals across the world including Tectonics, Athens, The Sydney Festival, and the London Contemporary Music Festival. Through her research in just intonation tuning theory, string harmonics and musical instrument design, Fullman has developed a compositional and performative approach that expands harmonic motion through a focus on upper partial tones.

PATRICIA NICHOLSON

Patricia Nicholson's dance is steeped in the aesthetic of free jazz with an attention to spiritual and social responsibility. Beginning with the belief that dance is the visual manifestation of sound and energy, Ms. Nicholson has developed a singular practice, one drawing from both traditional and unconventional techniques to create an eclectic yet intuitive approach to movement and composition. Nicholson's widest-reaching influence has perhaps been in her capacity as an artistic and community organizer. In 1981, Nicholson choreographed and organized A Thousand Cranes Peace Opera, with 1,000 children performing in Dag Hammarskjold Plaza for the opening of the Special Sessions on Disarmament; in the mid- and late-1980s, she responded to a lack of visibility for free jazz by helping to organize the Sound Unity Festivals. In 1994, Nicholson brought together fifty artists to form The Improvisors Collective, whose highlights over the next two years included weekly events at Context Studios, 28 Ave A. Following that success, in 1996, Nicholson founded Arts For Art and the Vision Festival to promote and advocate for free jazz, raising awareness through this notable and uncommonly visible platform. Since, AFA has grown to be a movement that supports hundreds of artists annually working with the free jazz aesthetic.

EILEEN MYLES

Eileen Myles is a poet, novelist, and art journalist whose practice of vernacular first-person writing has become a touchstone for the identity-fluid internet age. *Pathetic Literature*, which they edited is out in November. They live in New York and Marfa, TX. Their fiction includes *Chelsea Girls* (1994), *Cool for You* (2000), *Inferno (a poet's novel)* (2010) and *Afterglow* (2017). Writing on art was gathered in the volume *The Importance of Being Iceland: Travel Essays in Art* (2009). Books of poetry include *Evolution* (2018) and *I Must Be Living Twice: New and Selected Poems 1975–2014* and in Spring 2023 a "Working Life" will be released upon the world. They take pictures which they've shown at Bridget Donahue & in Provincetown at Schoolhouse Gallery. Their super-8 road film "The Trip" is on YouTube. They live in New York & in Marfa, TX.

BRANDON LOPEZ

Brandon Lopez is a New York City–based bassist and composer whose work is a syncretism of disparate styles and musical processes used to extend and transgress the vocabulary of the double bass. He's collaborated with an exhaustive list of great musicians and thinkers. He was a featured soloist with the New York Philharmonic. He's been the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships (Van Lier Fellowship, Jerome Residency at Roulette Intermedium, Artist in Resident at Issue Project Room, Doris Duke Charitable Trust, The Robert D. Bielecki Foundation). His collaborations with Gerald Cleaver and Fred Moten were featured in the NY Times best of Jazz 2022.

MICHAEL RANTA

Michael Ranta is an American percussionist born in Duluth, Minnesota in 1942, now based in Germany. From 1973-1979 he was prolific with concerts, recordings, sessions, and other works. Since 1979 he has settled down as the resident composer, percussionist, and instrument handler, at Asian Sound in Cologne.

VINCENT DE ROGUIN

Vincent de Roguin is a Geneva-based artist and author. An instrumental and electroacoustic composer –commissioned to write for the Bern Symphony Orchestra and the Acousmonium of the Groupe de Recherches Musicales (GRM) among others –, he is also a founding member of the improvised music ensemble Æthenor with Daniel O'Sullivan and Stephen O'Malley, and was a member of the band Shora between 2001 and 2007. De Roguin has worked as an exhibition curator, published several essays and books, and also works as an independent researcher and bookseller. His recent activities include a series of conferences on John Heartfield and war imagery in hardcore punk, the publication of a monographic book on the Swiss band The Young Gods (The Most Beautiful Swiss Books Prize 2017), mixing a record by Timo van Luijk & Kris Vanderstraeten, and reactivating the sound installations of composer Max Neuhaus.

SARAH HENNIES

Sarah Hennies is a composer based in Upstate NY whose work is concerned with a variety of musical, sociopolitical, and psychological issues including queer & trans identity, psychoacoustics, and the social and neurological conditions underlying creative thought. She is primarily a composer of acoustic ensemble music, but is also active in improvisation, film, and performance art. She presents her work internationally as both a composer and percussionist with notable performances at MoMA PS1 (NYC), Monday Evening Concerts (Los Angeles), Le Guess Who (Utrecht), Festival Cable (Nantes), send + receive (Winnipeg), O' Art Space (Milan), Cafe Oto (London), ALICE (Copenhagen), and the Edition Festival (Stockholm). As a composer, she has worked with a wide array of performers and ensembles including Bearthoven, Bent Duo, Claire Chase, ensemble 0, Judith Hamann, R. Andrew Lee, The Living Earth Show, Talea Ensemble, Thin Edge New Music Collective, Two-Way Street, Nate Wooley, and Yarn/Wire.

LESLEY MOK

Lesley Mok is an improviser, composer, percussionist, and sound artist based in Brooklyn, NY. Interested in the ways social conditions shape our beings, Lesley's work focuses on overacting humanness to explore ideas about alienness and privilege. Her ongoing explorations with composition and improvisation are most notably documented in her ten-piece improvising chamber ensemble, The Living Collection (releases May 5, 2023, by American Dreams). Lesley's work has been recognized by the ASCAP Foundation, Roulette Intermedium, and the Asian American Arts Alliance, and has been performed by International Contemporary Ensemble, Metropolis Ensemble, and JACK Quartet. She has collaborated with Tomeka Reid, Fay Victor, William Parker, Cory Smythe, Jen Shyu, Myra Melford, Sara Serpa, Elias Stemeseder, David Leon, Doyeon Kim, Anna Webber, Adam O'Farrill, and others.

NATASHA PICKOWICZ

Natasha Pickowicz is a New York City–based chef and writer. She is a three-time James Beard Foundation Award finalist. Much of her pastry work explores the relationship between baking and social justice, including ongoing collaborations with seminal New York City institutions like Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, God's Love We Deliver, the Brigid Alliance, and Planned Parenthood of Greater New York, for whom she produced a massive city-wide bake sale, raising over $200,000 between 2017 and 2023. Currently, Pickowicz runs the pastry pop-up called Never Ending Taste, which has been held at NYC's Superiority Burger, Brooklyn's the Four Horsemen, the American-Vietnamese bakery Ba. n B., the Taiwanese tearoom T. Company, Los Angeles's Kismet, and the legendary Chino Farm in Rancho Santa Fe, California. Pickowicz's recipes and writing have been published in the *New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, Bon App.tit, Saveur, Food & Wine, New York* magazine, *Cherry Bombe,* and many other publications. Follow her on Instagram at @natashapickowicz.

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