

Alvin Lucier: A Singular Focus

Arnold Dreyblatt

From 1974–75, I studied with video artists Woody and Steina Vasulka at the Center for Media Study at the State University at Buffalo, N.Y. The Vasulkas were experimenting with analog translations between sound and image utilizing electronic control signals and I had participated in courses at the Music Department with Morton Feldman, Pauline Oliveros and Joel Chadabe at the "Summer in Buffalo" program in June, 1974 as well.

It was during this period that I first experienced a live performance by Alvin Lucier during one of the "Evenings for New Music" programs at the State University. A performance of "Still and Moving Lines of Silence" by the Creative Associates (including Julius Eastman as a vocalist) appears solely on the concert program for December 8, 1974, yet I remember clearly Alvin performing a version of the work which later became the composition "Music for Snare Drum, Pure Wave Oscillator and One or More Reflective Surfaces". A single snare drum was placed on a stand (with the snare released) in the middle of the enormous symphony orchestra stage of Baird Hall. Alvin sat on a table on the right side of the stage, with his hands controlling an amplified analog sine wave generator with large rotating dials. The audio signal was routed through a loudspeaker hung from the ceiling and faced away from the drum to the walls of the stage. As Alvin gradually altered frequency and amplitude over time the drum began to sound, at first hesitantly, then dramatically. The travelling standing waves vibrated the bodies of the audience as they passed over, and the drumbeats initiated without the contact of a performer with a drum head seem to reduce the event of sound propagation to just the simple movement of air molecules in space as perceived by the ear and nervous system.

I was later to study with Alvin at Wesleyan University (1980-1982), but the visceral body experience of this concert experience has remained a seminal moment in my biography ever since. I understood that the signals transported through cables as well as the sounds emanating from music instruments were passing through the air on the way to our receptive and processing organs and only then were perceived as sound. The signals that we were monitoring on oscilloscopes were actually displacements of energy in space.

Alvin Lucier began an unusually singular path, at a time when it was rare for composers to consider the physics of sound as the subject of musical composition. As John Cage had dislodged the perception of "Sound" from our cultural understanding of music, Alvin would focus his attentions to the perception of acoustic phenomena itself, utilizing the countless historical examples found in the treatises of acoustic research long before labels of "Sound Art or Audio Art" had been formulated.

Each piece was an offering: the audience would be invited to participate in the empirical reception of auditive phenomena. During a concert performance, I have always felt Alvin silently addressing the audience with a smile and a wink: "Do you hear it too? Do you hear that delicate but beautiful acoustic phenomena which I have prepared for you?". Often the goal of a work was in secondary experiences: not the primary emission of sound, but the reflective tones, the combinatory effects, the frequencies that are produced by the ear and receptive nervous system itself. Of his

generation, perhaps only Marianne Amacher explored related issues, but with very different modes of presentation.

In my classes with Alvin at Wesleyan, he was always very clear about the intents and the borders of his focus, and he continually impressed upon us students the importance of being precise in describing one's objectives. He always placed an emphasis on the texts which replaced the traditional notated score for many of his most important works, and I would propose that he adapted the format of textural intention from early developments in "Conceptual Art", which had been a parallel historical development. For example, he was friends with Sol Lewitt, with whom he also had collaborated. I remember Alvin once talking at length about Vladimir Nabokov's lecture on Kafka's "Metamorphosis" which he had been reading at the time. He was struck by the meticulousness of Nabokov's structural analysis of the text. It was as if he wanted us by example to pay more attention to conceptual differentiations in our own work, as well as to the precise construction of framework and intent.

There has and will be much written about Alvin Lucier, but perhaps it is this sense of tenacity and resoluteness which for me has most characterized his life and his creative work. He remained active and innovative up to his last years, and he was able to collaborate and communicate with a younger generation of musicians, composers, and artists who had come to appreciate the scope of his work as an awareness of the physical nature of sound production in acoustic space has become a an essential component of mainstream musical and sonic discourse.

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