

## Q&A WITH M.I.T. VISITING ARTIST ARNOLD DREYBLATT

Sharon Lacey, 2015

Media artist and composer [Arnold Dreyblatt](#)'s connection to MIT began in 2000. As both a visual artist and a composer, there have been multiple threads to his involvement at MIT over the years. In his residency this fall he was involved in many aspects of CAST and MTA, with multiple performances, including concerts at both the [CAST](#) and [MTA](#) symposia, as well as teaching "[The Harmonic Archive](#)". In addition to recounting these public events, he discusses his research during his residency at MIT, including his upcoming project "[Performing the Black Mountain Archive](#)" at [Hamburger Bahnhof Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in Berlin, his ongoing work with [Dr. Maiya Geddes](#) in memory and a new project related to his work with texts and archives inspired by [Catherine Havasi](#)'s work with the [Narratarium](#) project in the MIT Media Lab.

*Since the work you presented at the Infinite Record symposium touches on a lot of aspects of your work with text and archives, could you describe that project and how it relates to Dr. Maiya Geddes' work with memory?*

To recount it, *Infinite Record* is a project initiated in Norway by the Norwegian Theatre Academy with three different artist residencies and four symposia. I was involved as one of the visiting artists, and also as a host as a professor at the Muthesius Art Academy in Kiel. At the end of the symposium at MIT, Dr. Geddes and I presented our work. Then, we presented a performance with students in Theater Arts from a concept we developed together focusing on the "rest states of the brain" and using selected texts, ranging from St. Augustine's *Confessions* to works by Jane Austen, Marcel Proust and Samuel Beckett.

My work focuses on written storage, or the written traces of culture, in terms of individual storage (identity), as well as bureaucratic storage. When I was here last year, I became interested in the neurological research about memory that's being done at MIT, which I thought would further enhance my work, and possibly take it in a new direction.

I met with Maiya Geddes, who has a background in the arts, as well as being a Post-doc in the Gabrieli Lab and a practicing physician who works with Alzheimer's patients. When we began talking of a proposed starting point for our collaboration, she suggested we focus on the rest state of the brain and she explained that, with the developments of functional MRIs, one can localize brain activity during non-active states.

Some of the most interesting work being done now in brain research is observed where there is no outside stimulus, yet the brain is actually very active. There is a particular rhythm in which the distant past, more recent memories and environmental awareness each come "online" for a period of seconds, and then recede as a temporal pattern. These discoveries have correlations to automatic writing and surrealism and other important aesthetic developments in the 20th century.

It is an area of research that got my antennas going, and we created a performance with Anna Köhler from Theater Arts, using well known texts related to memory and perception. We assigned these texts to this structure in which subliminal thoughts

come online and then recede. A student from my class in "The Harmonic Archive" programmed software that was used as a score in order to follow the sinusoidal pattern of activity in time.

*Your pieces with archive and text precede your involvement with the Norwegian Theatre Academy (NTA) and the Infinite Record project. How did you first hit upon the use of archive and text in your work?*

It dates back to finding a particular book, *Who's Who in Central and Eastern Europe, 1933*. It's a biographical dictionary from an important period in European history, which contains fragmentary textual material; a compressed biography of an individual is inherently incomplete.

In a way, my own query to that text initiated my approach to working with textual material and asking questions about individual and cultural storage. Most of the names of people in the book were important at the time, but are no longer of interest to most outside those countries. So there is a real sense of pathos and vanity associated with it. That book led to much larger questions about looking at where personal and bureaucratic knowledge is stored and examining the institution of the archive.

*Currently, you are working on your upcoming project at Hamburger Bahnhof Museum, which deals with the Black Mountain College archives in Asheville, NC. What is your new work for that exhibition?*

My participation is within an exhibition about Black Mountain College, which opens June 2015. I was asked to propose a project in relation to the archival material. There are two aspects of the history of Black Mountain that I find particularly pertinent as someone living in Berlin who comes from the States: One is the enormous contribution of German émigrés to the College from 1933 on, and second is the influence these individuals had on the avant-garde in New York in the sixties. Certain seeds planted at Black Mountain ended up in New York or on the West Coast when those individuals left the site of the college in North Carolina. My interdisciplinary career is very much influenced by the legacy of Black Mountain.

In terms of the project itself, I felt that a project within an historical exhibition should relate the historical material to our contemporary time, especially pertaining to art education. Black Mountain College arose as a response to Dewey's reform ideas on art as a central element in education. I had the sense that this would have to be a very different project than I've done before and I wanted to involve art students.

My proposed project has some antecedents in my reading projects, my vocalizations of archival material from the 1990s. The work is called "Performing the Black Mountain Archive." It takes place over four months and involves nine different academies with students from literature to visual arts to dance and performance who are residence within the exhibition.

I will install an archive containing collected material on Black Mountain within the exhibition. At certain times of day, according to a score, the students will walk to external stations within the exhibition and read or perform material from the archive.

*Looking at Black Mountain as a template for how to negotiate working in multiple disciplines, can you reflect on your experience as a young artist deciding what*

*direction or medium to pursue? I know you studied music with Alvin Lucier and La Monte Young, but who were some of your other influences?*

Actually my first degree was not in music; it was in what today would be called media arts. It was at the Institute for Media Studies at SUNY Buffalo. I went there to study experimental film and video art and studied with Hollis Frampton, Woody Vasulka and Paul Sharits and later I worked at Anthology Film Archives in New York as the video assistant in the 70s.

While at Buffalo I also studied composition with Pauline Oliveros and with Morton Feldman, although at this time I was still a “visitor” from the visual arts. It was later in the early 80s that I actually went for a Masters of Music degree from Wesleyan University, where I studied with Alvin Lucier.

In the late 70s I studied with the composer La Monte Young and worked as an assistant for Nam June Paik and for Shegeko Kubota at Anthology Film Archives. George Maciunas had his office in the basement and Jonas Mekas has his office upstairs. In the 60s and 70s in New York — and it is something I extremely miss—the environment was interdisciplinary and there was much interest and contact between artists of all disciplines. I have come to understand the role that Black Mountain played in the development of the New York art scene and later in my own biography. Black Mountain College closed in 1957, and many of the important later figures gravitated to New York.

*Do your visual art works and your music inform one another?*

Yes, in many ways, although it may not be superficially apparent. In the early 90s I did some projects in which I combined sound with visual projections but later formally separated my image and sound work. On the other hand, my large reading performances were created according to music-like scores. My approach to performance is very much related to composition, but I have separated my identities as a composer and artist in order to allow these different areas exist on their own.

*Your first two performances last semester were “Nodal Excitations for Double Bass and Piano Wire” and “Spin Ensemble,” which are very different. One is acoustic and visceral, while the other is digital and more analytical. Do you have a preference for traditional instruments or newer technology?*

I have avoided performing with electronics in recent years, although I have had experience working with analog synthesis in the early days. While I have generally preferred acoustically-generated sounds, there are exceptions. I was fascinated when I first had an Magnetic Resonance Imaging, which I understood as being generated by the scanning of gigantic tuned electromagnetic coils, which I recognized from the work of Tesla. This is certainly one of the very few electronically-generated sounds that has appealed to me.

The fact that “Spin Ensemble” is generated by this physical event makes it similar to a musical instrument by being based on the vibration of material.

Secondly, electronically generated sine waves form the basis of some of the most important investigations by both Alvin Lucier and La Monte Young. Some of my own early experiments were with sine waves. These are waves with no harmonic content, yet they allow for the perception of some very interesting sonic phenomena in space.

*Is your interest in sound itself?*

Yes, the experience of sound itself in a visceral sense. I'm not primarily interested in the compositional structure for its own sake, but rather in a visceral and empirical experience of sound. Regarding musical performance, I'm not interested in virtuosity, but in the liberation of the inherent resonance found in instrumentation, not in their control and manipulation.

*Regarding your research during your CAST residency this semester, you have made contact with Dr. Catherine Havasi and will proceed with a collaborative project. I know it is in the nascent stage, but can you talk a bit about what you propose to create?*

Last year when I was here I discovered a technology project called the *Narratarium* in the Media Lab. I proposed an installation called "Hemisphere," which is an immersive projection environment, which responds to speech. It will involve a database that can store images and sounds and texts that you can interact with. During the fall semester, I got in touch with Dr. Catherine Havasi, who was a student of Marvin Minsky, and she's a linguist who was involved in the inception of the *Narratarium*. I will bring Dr. Maija Geddes from the McGovern Institute for Cognitive Sciences and Catherine Havasi from the Media Lab together in working with me to create an installation as an interactive environment in simulating the dynamic cognitive networks in time and space.

I see this as a further development of my installation, "The Recollection Mechanism" that I created many years ago. I have a sense where this might go, and I'm very excited about the possibilities. I think that this reflects the ideal of CAST (Center for Arts, Science and Technology) – to bring an artist together with scientists from different disciplines. That's what's happening here.