r e a d e r
1 of 3

ARTIST:

JESSIE COX

CURATOR:

SAMI HOPKINS

PERFORMERS & RECORDING ENGINEERS:

KATHRYN SCHULMEISTER
JULIANA GOANA-VILLAMIZAR
"DAC" CHANG
DOUGLAS R. EWART
DAVU SERU
DOUGLAS OSMUN

READER CONTRIBUTORS:

ISAAC JEAN-FRANCOIS
SAMUEL YULSMAN
BONAVENTURE NDIKUNG

READER DESIGN:

CAROLINA VELASCO
JUAN FELIPE PAREDES

ISSUE TEAM:

ZEV GREENFIELD
NICK SCAVO
EAMES ARMSTRONG
BOB BELLARUE
CORINNE DANIEL

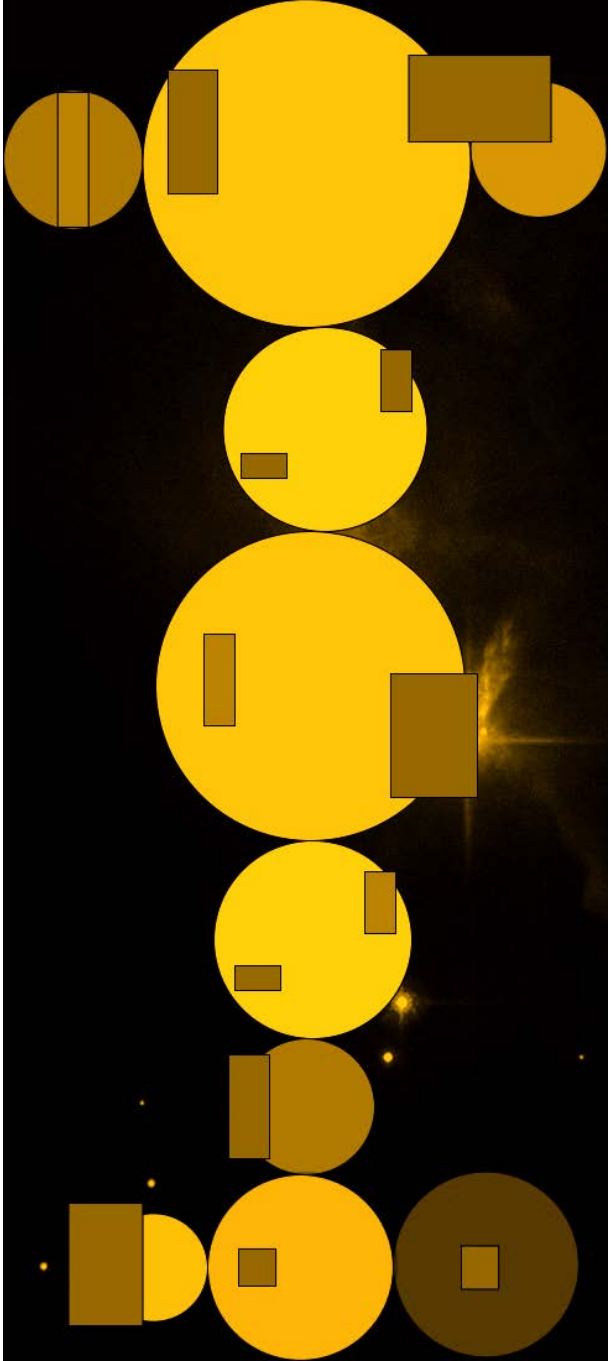
ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Presented by ISSUE Project Room's 2021 Suzanne Fiol Curatorial Fellow Sami Hopkins: *Propositions from the deadWIP* is a multidisciplinary performance series that balances considerations of knowledge and fallibility, launching from the premise that creative knowing imbues the process of making as much as a work's eventual presentation or future iterations. By never claiming to reach finality, the works in this series accept the condition of being always "in progress," with the potential to reimagine the status of a work-in-progress (WIP) altogether.

In this first installment of the series, Jessie Cox presents his composition *The Sound of Listening*: an improvisatory work that engages Cox's speculation of a body's potential in forming new time-space experiences. Conceived as a participatory event, listeners and musicians behave as agents in space dictating their movement through the work via virtual "rooms" of Cox's construction (each room hosting an assigned soundscape and suite) and thereby determining how the composition itself is configured.

Through this experiment with listening-as-making, Cox considers how space and time (loosely represented in "sound rooms") may be encoded in the body—and above all, how a body, materialized virtually or otherwise, might alter the geographies of sensory, spatial, or temporal experience, mapping the terrains of history, present, and future. How might one listen, but also act as a listener when participating in the formation of space, explored within the domain of this time-based work?

Within the broader deadWIP, Cox argues for the ways a body(mind) might re-articulate sound events through a type of listening that is at once generative and autonomously deployed.



THE SOUND OF LISTENING "ROOMS" MAP

CURATOR'S NOTE

There is, I think, some humor in the popularity of coining neologisms like deadWIP—especially those that manage to find their way into the popular lexicon. The practice seems to make a case for concretizing (or branding) an idea, often one that has sprung from an existing notion already embedded in a broader social practice. In this series, the hope is to put forth such a neologism in a wholly speculative spirit. (Is "deadWIP" an accurate terming in this case for a work-in-progress that never ends? Perhaps *undead*WIP? Is the term WIP itself useless?)

Boaventura de Sousa Santos, in his work and associated book *Epistemologies of the South* (2014), writes at length about what he calls "cognitive injustice", delineating regimes of hegemonic power that invalidate, absent, or mystify the myriad ways of human "knowing". Though the sensibilities and intention of this project may differ slightly from those of de Sousa Santos, they are alike in their shared concern for how such ways of knowing might be laid bare, made horizontal.

The deadWIP is itself an incomplete project. In both its conception and execution it is not interested in projecting what its own ideas (or any idea, for that matter) should be. The process of assembling even this publication has been imperfect, with countless changes and perhaps more still to come. Still, the bottom line remains that seeds of knowing lie not only in this project's final outcome, but also in the process of creative exploration, discovery—always thinking and making collectively—and at times even in spirited disagreement with common sense. As such, the deadWIP may not be or house those ideas that are rendered elite, widely accepted, necessarily "rational", or "realistic"; rather they may instantiate the existence of knowledge outside of these paradigms. As de Sousa Santos puts it, "all that [is] arbitrarily conceived of as being outside [the] highly intellectualized and rationalized field [is] ignored or stigmatized. Outside [is] the dark world of passions, intuitions, feelings, emotions, affections, beliefs, faiths, values, myths, and the world of the unsayable, which cannot be communicated save indirectly, as Kierkegaard would say." (2014, 12) Hereafter, any reference to "knowledge" should also conjure Santos' "dark world".

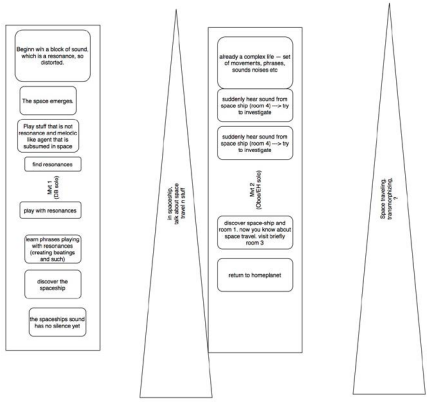
As a part of this program, and the future programs within the series, the artist has generously submitted work-in-progress mate-

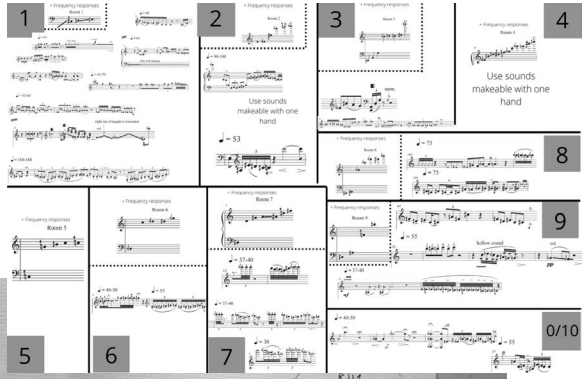
rials documenting his process from the moment of the project's conception through its public debut. In addition to these materials, enclosed in this reader are contributions to Jessie Cox's proposition, *The Sound of Listening*, in the form of an essay by Samuel Yulsman, and two dialogues between the artist and contributors Isaac Jean-François and Bonaventure Ndikung. Together this cohort seeks to foreground some of the key moments and features of *The Sound of Listening*—referencing imagined worlds, the varied sensations and possibilities that lie within a human body and the space it inhabits, citing artists such as Halim El-Dabh, Emeka Ogboh, Sam Auinger, Kamau Brathwaite—and position all of this creative work within the broader deadWIP.

Cox takes this a step further, not just by applying the principles of the deadWIP to his process, but molding his entire work around the concept. In his conversation with Jean-François, Cox speaks of the deadWIP impulse in the form of a map—which, according to him, serves as a symbol for "concretized" knowledge, daring to indicate what is and is not, with little room for movement beyond it. Given this proposal, the map of Cox's composition itself, a diagram of circles and rectangles within which the musicians and audience visually traverse his score, is also a type of knowing—albeit potentially imperfect or incomplete. Perhaps there are "rooms" beyond it, spaces that have yet to be discovered in this first iteration of *The Sound of Listening*. Within it there may even be corners yet unexplored, but in this first iteration of the work we hope, at least, that any incompleteness may be exposed, with Cox, in a sense, our map authority—visible, his thinking and process likewise unconcealed, and us, participants in this sound world, with some agency to examine it, resist, explore, or exit, should we choose.

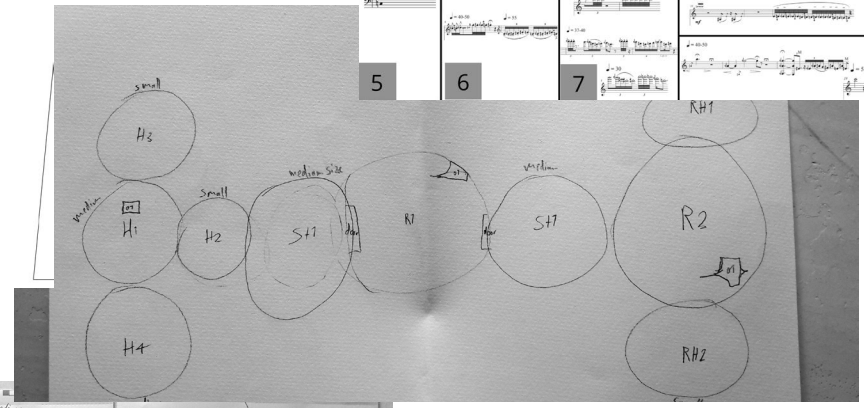
Perhaps in these creative works, the spaces of experimentation where an idea need not be perfect, validated, or final, we can think and ideate with an open attitude. I hope that the deadWIP also invites such approaches outside of the more intimate creative space—working beyond the orthodoxy that might suggest "knowing" is fixed, mapped onto a continuum from beginning to end, or that each concept must necessarily become a "conceptual monster" as de Sousa Santos might call it. de Sousa Santos speaks also of living well, *buen vivir*. In this, one final reference to his work, *Propositions from the deadWIP* shares kinship as well. If one were to impose a final objective for this otherwise very open idea, the best would be that it serve as a playful invitation for living well, supporting an openness for experimentation and creative knowledge that continues long after we are dead or gone.

DRAFT COMPOSITION LAYOUT (PART 1)

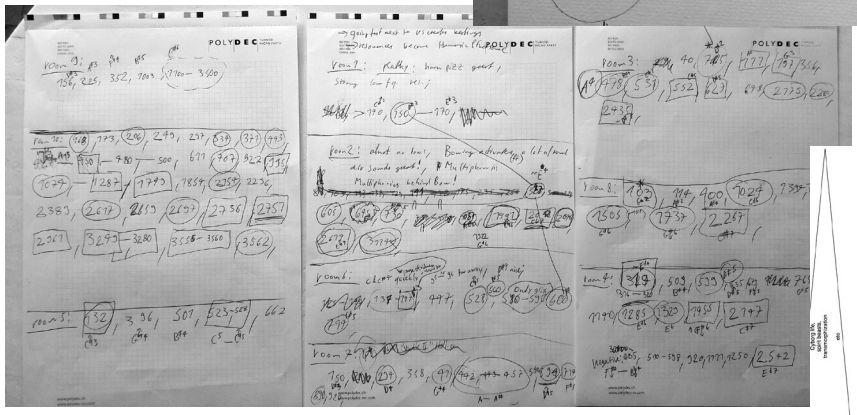




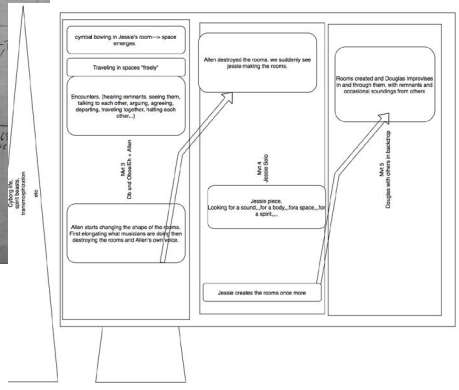
ROOM MATERIALS SCORES



HANDWRITTEN ARTIST NOTES FOR THE SOUND OF LISTENING



THE SOUND OF LISTENING COMPOSITION MAP - HANDWRITTEN ARTIST DRAFT



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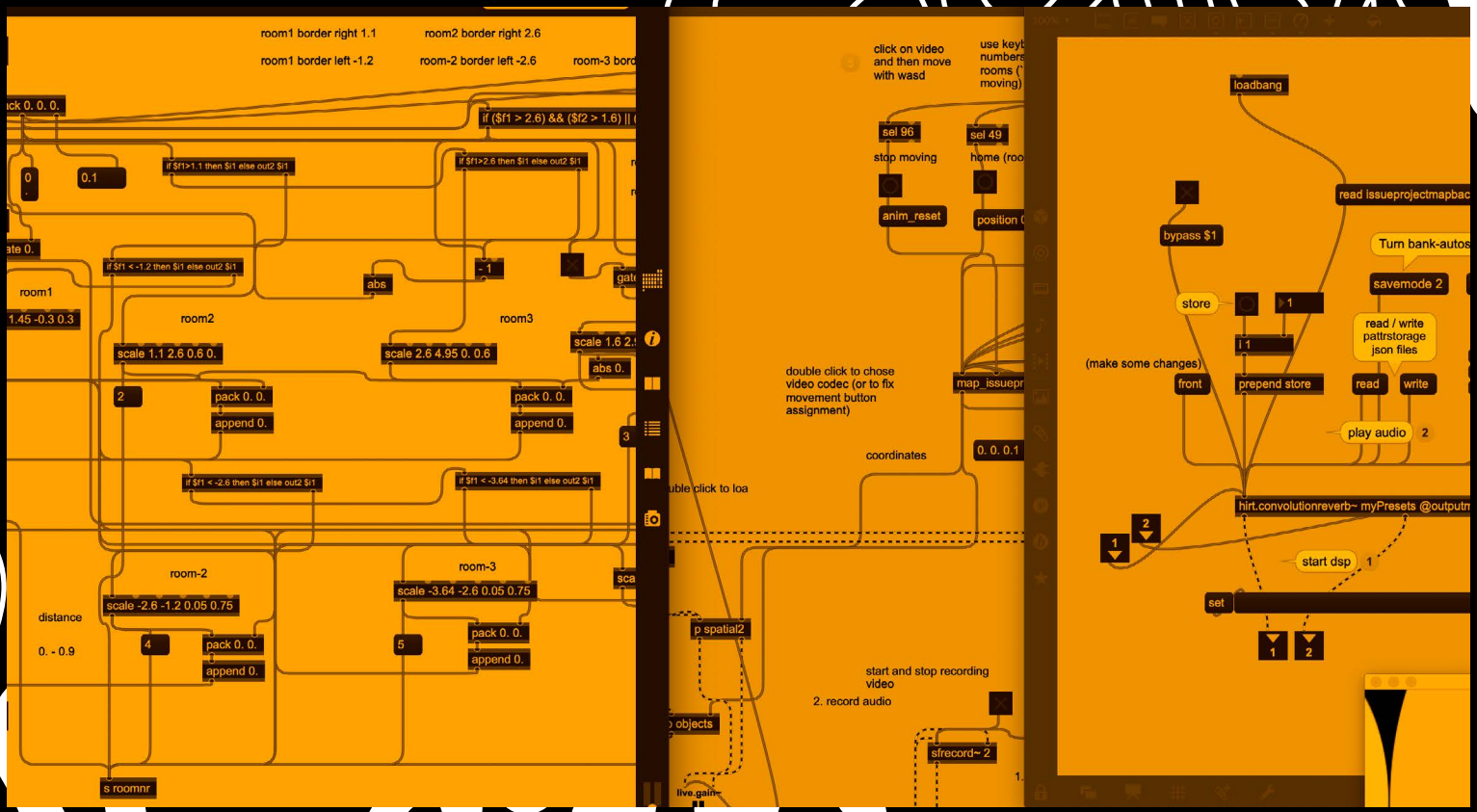

VIRTUAL ACOUSTIC SPACE GENERATING SOFTWARE

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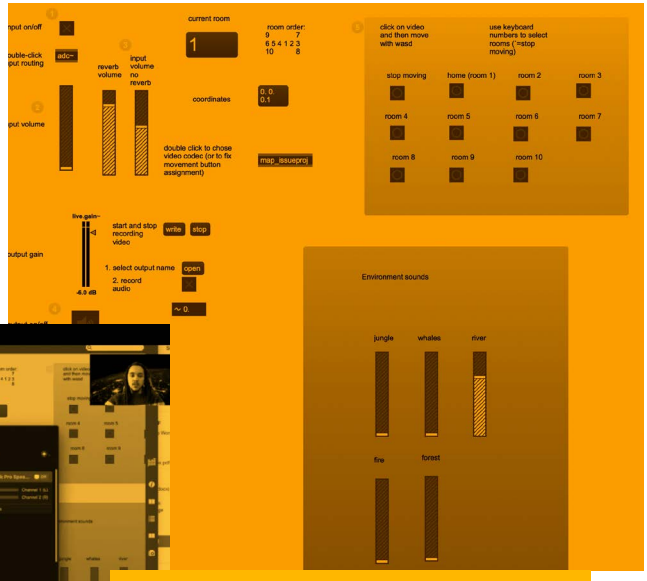
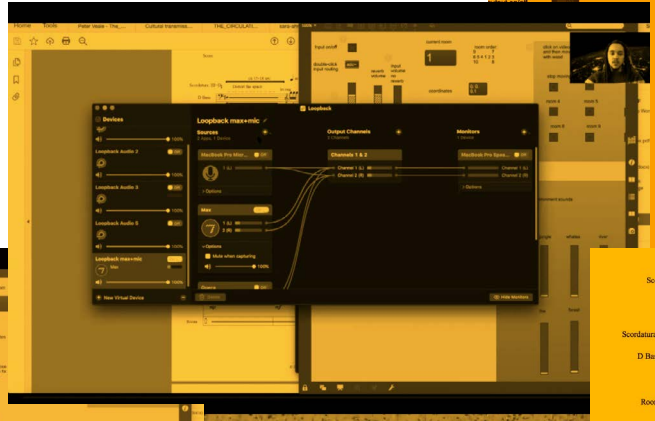
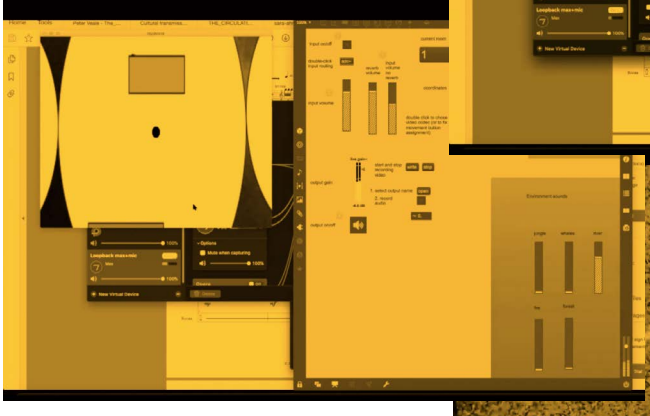
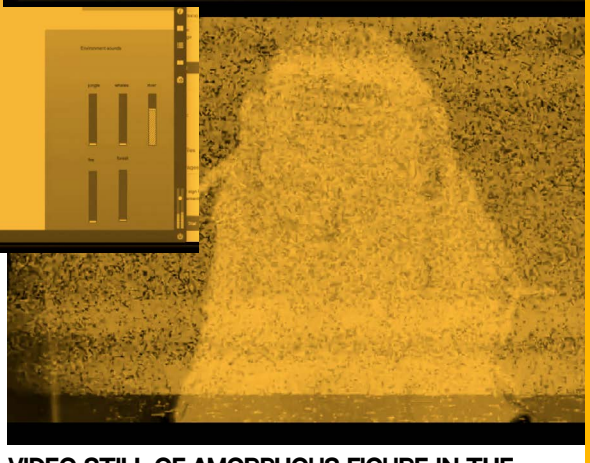


MAX PATCH + SIGNAL ROUTING TO AND FROM ZOOM

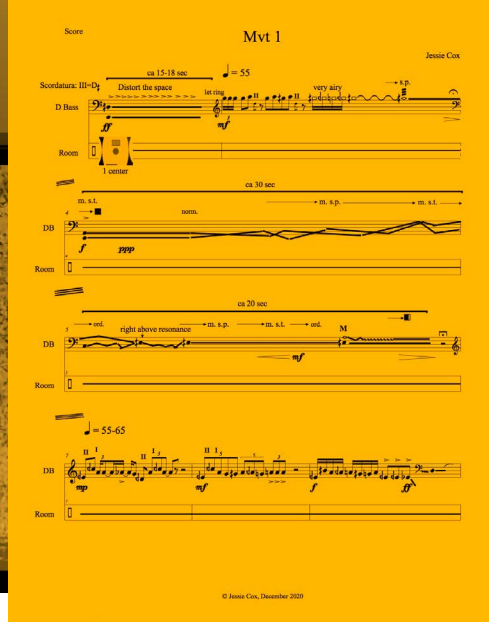


VIRTUAL ACOUSTIC SPACE GENERATING SOFTWARE WITH THE MAP USED BY MUSICIANS TO NAVIGATE THE SPACE





VIDEO STILL OF AMORPHOUS FIGURE IN THE SOUND OF LISTENING



COMPOSITION EXCERPT

JESSIE COX
IN-CONVERSATION WITH
ISAAC JEAN-FRANCOIS

Isaac Jean-François *There's so much material here. And I'm incredibly grateful to you for allowing me into this universe that you've crafted here. So I first want to see if we can situate this project that you've embedded yourself in and embedded the listener in—can we situate that along with some of the other projects that you've worked on or is this a wormhole? Is it a totally new burst of inspiration?*

Jessie Cox I mean, there's a lot of components that have been brewing, I think, in previous works. But in some ways it's kind of new too. I mean, something that I never thought I would do is to make a virtual acoustic world. Actually it only happened because of COVID that I really entered into that inquiry of sound-world, sound, and music. So I made this TV series, Space Travel from Home and in that TV series, I have that stuff too. I have different "planets" and they have different acoustics, but you know I didn't have—like the [virtual] "rooms" were empty, and it's kind of boring when the rooms are empty, it's a sterile room because most rooms, they have many different things in them that make them feel alive.

Something that I found interesting, for example, is that furniture or houses or a door or something filter the sound differently. So when you walk around in a room that's empty, you know how it feels, it feels strange, right? It's kind of uncomfortable. Where if you walk around in a room that has stuff like even just the door or one piece of furniture, or let's say with an empty space and there's one house, it makes it feel alive because you can move around and you notice that as you move around sound kind of changes. And then the other part is there are always environmental noises pretty much in every space. Sometimes it's just wind or air, other times it can be crickets or fire, pipes in your house or something, the cracking of the floor. So these are sounds that I think are really important to our experience of space. That's why I had that, I added that [to this piece].

Jean-François *What I think you're reminding us is that there's a kind of interiority to the physical structure itself. And in this piece, what I was really struck by is how might you figure yourself within a kind of timbral expanse. You're reminding us that there's an interior to the actual physical matter of the instrument, which is to say that not only can we understand the instrument in a classical sense—trumpet, whatever—but that the door, the floor, not that there's just a sound that emits when you encounter it or engage with it, but that there's actually sound nestled within that matter. And so, I wonder if you could speak to how we might craft a listening endeavor that attends to the sound that's already embedded within the fascia of these different objects.*

Cox Yeah, I think that that's a really good point. I'm glad you picked up on this because maybe it will be helpful to talk about the process of getting to that idea of the instrument as a space or space as the instrument—and with space also, of course, time. We can talk about that a bit later maybe too. Well, I was reading Sami's prompt for her year-long curatorial fellowship. And there, there was this idea she brought forth which she calls deadWIP, which means dead work-in-progress. And to me, it was about the question of the meeting of death and life, because in-progress to me means it's not ended yet, so it's living or alive, and dead means of course dead. There is also the "work", which is also both a process, like working, but also something dead like an artwork, you know, an artifact that has a memory of life.

So there's this weird constellation or super-positionality of life and death. And to me, at that time, I was also really fascinated with—it's something I'm still fascinated with in my practice—the bowing of cymbals. To me that was kind of the same situation, like the cymbal is a map material that's really clearly solid, it's a very set

type of material. You don't even expect it to move, and when you bow a cymbal, you're making that dead material move and become alive. So there's this meeting of energy and matter, and that creates this whole sound world, that is actually also spatialized. It has a space to it and also a time, because it changes over time and it has movement. So that's how I was relating to the idea of deadWIP. And I think that is how it allows us to see sound in another way, and instruments in another way as well, where sound is also a question of listening—I guess that's part of the idea of being in a space itself. Like the space has a sound.

So each of these circles ["rooms" in the composition map] has a sound to it—an experiential sound that can only come alive when you're in there and you're experiencing it, which also merges with the sound you make inside of it. So your sound and the space's sound are never completely disjunct, they're always related. Furthermore, in the piece you have moments where it becomes clear that we're talking about bodies in general, not only like territorial bodies or planets, but also human bodies: so the cymbals and bowing them on my own body, for example, or Alan is changing things on his body—through the computer, of course—but nonetheless, the things are attached to his body and he touches them and it changes something in the space or [changes] the space itself, or these "planets" that we were talking about before. I wanted to set that up so that you have these many different relationships between the space, the body, the instrument, the sound, the silence and listening.

I THINK THAT IT'S VERY IMPORTANT THAT WE REALIZE—I GUESS THIS PIECE MADE ME REALIZE—THAT THE SPACE WE ARE IN AND US, YOU KNOW, HOW MUCH [WE ARE] ENTANGLED, HOW MUCH [WE ARE] DEPENDENT.

The listener to me also shifts in that way, because actually the way you will listen—or actually the way you are listening to the piece—involves you sometimes just hearing the environment. And when you hear the environment, then, you're kind of the actant of the story because there's nothing really happening. We don't see the environment as telling a story normally or the room. And when you listen to somebody make music in it, you hear somebody inside that space, maybe you share that space. But what happens then, for example, if you hear somebody who makes the space and then you enter the space. That's completely different again, where you stand in relation to the music itself.

Jean-François → *I think what's so provocative about this piece is the question of where you stand in relation to the music. It's like you're always making the music, but also the listening act is dynamically constituting yourself. It is confirming the one who is—or the many who are—experiencing and listening to this piece. [Dog barking over Zoom] And see, we're situated in more sonic environments!*

Cox → I think that it's very important that we realize—I guess this piece made me realize—that the space we are in and us, you know, how much [we are] entangled, how much [we are] dependent. And this is why actually, in one part of the piece you will see how people go through sort of genetic mutations, because when you change your timbre, your voice's timbre, you're changing your materiality. And if

you enter into a space that has a certain sound to it, it's like, imagine you go from being on land to being in water—the sound changes, right? Now I was imagining in some fictive world, you could go into a space that has a completely different materiality. So for an exoplanet where you have to not be human anymore, because there's some other atmosphere, you have to have a completely different body makeup.

Jean-François → *This is making me think of a walk I did two days ago. I'm visiting home in Staten Island now, and there's a street that I have always walked along. And for whatever reason, I went up—and there's a lot of hills in the North fork of Staten Island—I went up a block higher and looked at the street that I've always walked along from another vantage point. This is what I see the piece doing; being situated within the different timbral constraints or expanses of an instrument is a complete reorientation of how you might be able to access the sound of an instrument. You know, it's one thing to listen to the siren [gestures outwardly] or to*

think of the sound of an instrument. And then it's another thing to actually be placed within that universe. I mean, it's really a universe. So I guess, and this is, you know, I'm being selfish here because I'm always thinking about the body—what then happens to that? I mean, I felt unraveled when I was listening to you speak within the different timbre, I had to change the way I was listening. I had to play with my computer or play with my headphones to see if I was getting what you were saying, because it was a different world.

Cox → Yeah. Right, right. Actually in every room you should actually speak differently. You know that movie *Arrival*, I think it's called *Arrival*, right? Where they made the alien languages? So one thing that I found interesting is that they were imagining the body of the alien to develop their languages. This is why it's, to me, it's interesting because not only do you need to imagine the body of the thing speaking, you also need to imagine the space within which it speaks. And then also factors like how much space can change, how fast. So like these objects I was talking about, what if in this fictional version I can have an object that is so extreme that, you know, the sound will change so much that you would have to have a specific type of voice to be able to speak both in or in front of the object and away from the object, because it would be filtering so strongly or something like that. And then—

Jean-François → *So there's even an interference then. There's even an interference in these different spaces, which is strange because—I know in our conversations, we often talk in the register of superposition and points being enclosed upon each other, but also radically separate from each other. And it seems, it seems like in this scene it might be difficult to place yourself or to place where the sound is emanating from if you're always already embedded within that new or otherwise timbral construction.*

I THINK MAYBE ONE POINT TO MENTION IS BASICALLY WHAT I'M DOING IS OPPOSED TO STANDARD RECORDING PRACTICES.

Cox → I think maybe one point to mention is basically what I'm doing is opposed to standard recording practices. Right? What you're trying to do normally in recording is have a completely flat frequency response throughout the room, throughout all frequencies from zero to—well 20 to 20,000, right, our hearing spectrum. But what I basically am doing with this piece is they're really extreme frequency responses in these different rooms. That makes different kinds of instruments or voices not work in certain rooms and work too strong in others, or be perfect in others. And that's because the room is not neutralized, you know, and I find that always very interesting because this idea of trying to neutralize the room, I mean, that's kind of like, okay, we need the blank canvas so we can appreciate whatever is [on top of] it. But I'm more interested now in actually thinking about music that is deliberately part of the space it's in, in every way.

Jean-François → *Yeah I wonder then, and forgive me if I'm shuttling terms together here, but I wonder then how might this be a kind of creolized act—that the language of the space, which we often are supposed to just forget or ignore, is a part of the sound's world-making. You know, when concerts were a thing in-person, I always loved to hear when the seats would creak or when people would cough which now has a whole other, I mean, forget it, an intermission when people are going to be sneezing or whatever, is going to have a whole other kind of dynamic to it. But those were also elements of the performance. And I think that now, especially with a kind of double-downing on the recorded apparatus—the recorded sound, the recorded performance, the recorded piece that is produced in distance—there are certain sounds that are constantly muted. And I guess this is a long way of asking, but what are the violences then of not attending to the sounds that are constitutive of the piece?*

Cox → The process of creolization, which is really the improvisational process of re-making, discovering oneself and creating each other, which involves both violence, love as well, and all kinds of forces and things, should also incorporate spaces and times, environments, noises from the environment that mean nothing, plants, and animals to put it very simply. And I don't know, for me, like I said, the resonance in the room is almost like ghost-communication, you know, because when people say there is a ghost in the room, really, they mean it's the vibe of the room—you feel certain frequencies. We are very good at hearing that. When we enter a room we know if it has furniture or not, like I mentioned previously, that's because we hear acoustically, we hear the distribution of frequencies in the room. And similarly in this work there are at certain moments you can play a note and it will just keep ringing. And that's just because of the room being the way it is. The room has a character in that sense, and you can play with the room and all that stuff. So yeah, all of that is very important. And I very much think that is part of my understanding of music.

Now what I think this has allowed though, which is not possible yet, at least, outside of "the virtual", is space travel, which to me is—we have improvisation, we have iterative-ness, but space travel is that process across strange distances in both time and space. What do I mean by that? If you have the sound that is played in a church, and then in the next split second in your home, that is space travel. It's like teleportation, that's the same as taking a rocket, because you cannot destroy your distance or make it stranger. It would be like if you would take a step and suddenly you were on Mars. That's the type of speed that space traveling requires, right, faster than the speed of light. So I think this is something that we can't really do in music yet [without the] aid of technology.

I GUESS THIS PIECE REALLY ASKS THIS QUESTION: WHO GETS TO MAKE A MAP? WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO MAKE A MAP? A MAP IS NOT ONLY DRAWING BORDERS OR LINES, BUT IT'S ALSO SETTING UP A SET OF THINGS THAT CAN BE THINGS, THAT CAN'T BE THINGS, THAT CAN BECOME, THAT CAN'T BECOME, A SET OF FORCES, CAUSALITIES

Jean-François ⟶ The space of "the natural", which, I mean, *we could have a whole conversation another time about how fraught that construction is in terms of the different kinds of romanticized and idealized scenes that are embedded in the natural, that also have a deep history of racialized and gendered production. But the idea of the natural that we take so for granted as a kind of background is also too a kind of timbral expanse that is at once given, but then also constantly leaping away. And what I think also, and perhaps this could kind of serve as an opening ending here, is a way in which the work thinks through terms in deep friction, where at one point the conversation is about language but then immediately turns to a scene of distance and space. At one point it's a conversation about sound and it turns on you and is, is embedded with the body. So, I don't know, can you speak to the toolbox here? You know, like what instruments, what faculties we're as a listener, but also as composer alongside you, you know— how are we constantly asked to bounce between these terms and, and bounce between these spaces and times to be with, encounter, and make the piece?*

Cox ⟶ You know I think one of the fundamental questions that you've pointed to that this piece engages with is a very abstract kind of question and idea, and a very important one, which is basically we could either say the question of territories or the question of bodies. And here they are not removed from aliveness, and that creates this friction and messiness and this constant re-questioning of what they are and where they exist and where they don't. And this is really, I think what I want to, well, not what I wanted to, but I guess this piece really asks this question: Who gets to make a map? What does it mean to make a map? A map is not only drawing borders or lines, but it's also setting up a set of things that can be things, that can't be things, that can become, that can't become, a set of forces, causalities—laws are also part of that. And that is, to me, a very fundamentally important question for our time. Thinking about, for example, COVID: which countries get to shut their borders, who gets to move from one to another? That was always actually a question before COVID too, who gets to move to this country or that country. What does it mean to call something an empty space or wild space, or, you know, unsettled space? What does it mean to call something a property? What does it mean that somebody [exists within] a body of laws or, you know, is born or is dead? These are all entangled with this question of who gets to make the map to me.

Jean-François ⟶ *That's the thing. And I know that you and I will continue this conversation about the score, which has been on my mind, the score as map and also a kind of black sonic cartography, that the sound is constantly—you know, I like to think of my work with sound studies in some ways as, you know like the crime cartoons when they spray that like hairspray stuff, and you see the red lines that start to [emerge], you know—it's like the sound is giving us access to a different kind of tissue or entangled theme that is at once graphable, but deeply disinterested in being a discrete line or direction. And the grammar of the map, to think about this, is really some fascinating stuff.*

YOU'RE MAPPING YOURSELF, YOU'RE MAPPING ORDER, YOU'RE MAPPING ENVIRONMENT.

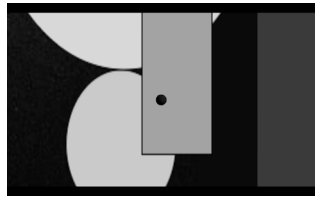
Cox ⟶ Yeah. And at the same time, you know, this piece also shows that sound is mapped, and in a very clear way, which only happened because part of the music is now [the ability] to move around. So it's not any more only to hear a sequence, but also to move around. So when you move into a space, you know what

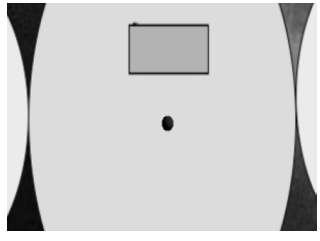
music works in that space because of what is being played by you or someone else, and you heard it, or you wrote it down, or somebody wrote it down and told you about it in some form, or recorded it in some way. And in that sense spaces start having their own music. And this again, shows that sound is also mapped, and when sound is also mapped, that means sound can also be a tool for rethinking what things mean or what things are, and so forth. Like sound as a productive process maybe, or something like that—as a way to also show how we listen, which is a form of making boundaries and a form of mapping the world—your listening, right? You're mapping yourself, you're mapping order, you're mapping environment.

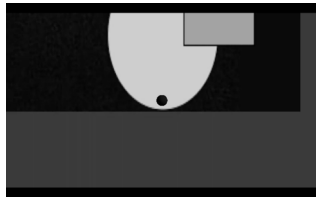
Jean-François → *Even in being a productive process, you know, it's not interested in showing you some kind of end. And I think that that was in the prompt as well, the curatorial prompt, about resisting a kind of end. Not even resisting or refusing, but just making or producing despite or in an otherwise practice that's not about discrete ends or explicit products. And I think that the idea of being situated within a sound-making apparatus that is not about wholeness, that is not about a final product, that is not about a fixity in place or where the recording will reside, is a really threatening and gorgeous call for a different kind of listening. I mean that is a kind of freedom that is acted precisely because it's calling for a radical undoing of the body.*

PART OF THIS PIECE IS ALL ABOUT MAKING, BECAUSE IN THE END, THIS IS A FICTIONAL UNIVERSE CREATED BY ME AND MY COLLABORATORS AND EVERYONE WHO'S GOING TO LISTEN.

Cox → And redoing. That is important. Because we have to remember that it's important to redo. Part of this piece is all about making, because in the end, this is a fictional universe created by me and my collaborators and everyone who's going to listen. And that will make it have a life until no one listens anymore, then it will die, or, you know, when no one engages with it in any form it might die then. But this is why it's also a question of redoing not only undoing, because at the end, really, this piece is not an analysis or it's not even engaging with any spaces that were there before this piece was made. So all the spaces in this piece are made by all of us.





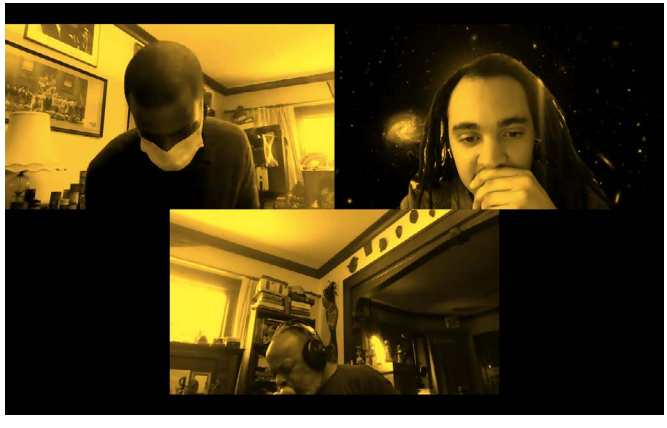


ISSAC JEAN-FRANCOIS (HE/HIM) IS A DOCTORAL STUDENT AT YALE UNIVERSITY IN THE JOINT DEGREE PROGRAM WITH AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES AND AMERICAN STUDIES. JEAN-FRANCOIS'S RESEARCH INTERESTS INCLUDE BLACK STUDIES, PHENOMENOLOGY, PSYCHOANALYSIS, QUEER THEORY, AND SOUND STUDIES.

CYPHERING
THE SOUND OF LISTENING
BY SAMUEL YULSMAN

The Sound of Listening teaches a future music where listening moves mobile, out from sitting still in "Time" together. What moves, extends, disturbs and cuts about this approach to the boundaries of "The Piece" (or "The Performance") is exactly its disfigured didacticism about "Time" and "Space", a disassembled pedagogy re-embodied by "Dac" Chang's cyborg interjections: the clues to what the sound of listening is about, what it isn't, what it could be, where it came from, where it's moving to and at what speed, are annunciated in ruined reverbs and alien ad-lib etymologies. We take our own notes on these lessons across the www from different times-spaces, never fully knowing how the next test is coming. The pointed hovers before, after, vexingly already like an uncanny word-game made from echolalia on the verge of ecstatic redefinition.

Coming to terms with this sensible edge – this vestibule of a knowable object, is as close to teachable knowledge Cox, Hopkins et al. afford our listening. Chang's rapping instead becomes a cryptographic key for (de)cyphering a deutero-lesson in situ: it modulates the horizon where the living, messily WIPed process of disfiguration/redefinition meets inklings of an abstraction out of reach - of an object-like representation of the listening-act itself. Cox makes a secretly transparent gesture towards this deathly abstract corpse by diagramming the rooms for us from the outset. It is on the one hand the interface we use to explore the piece, and on the other, a hieroglyph of how to listen to the sound of listening: start as cartographers, as explorers of a rough-given in search of what could be living but somewhere hidden.



What's unsettling about this deadWIP dubbed cartographic improvisation is that it takes the emergent blur of category redefinition not as an endpoint but as a quasi-ground built stone by stone with the labor of listening ancestors. Mapping the location of a body/space that cannot exist yet is part of the process already – it's like a handy Occam's razor embedded in the laws of physics – a liquid conditioning posed matter-of-factly in the shifting opacity of each room's wet acoustics. This liquefying of sound-gestures and listening-acts is accordingly never mere duration-extender or dissolution of a fixed orientation to time, space, instrument and listener knowledge/identity/assumption; on the contrary it contains in itself an even more secret ground, prefaced suddenly here and there by the illusion of liquid omnipresence: that lurking vexation of a certain convolution's insistence, its stubborn recalcitrance, its almost automated refusal to die away. What is hidden – and revealed first as a riddle in the room menu's diagrammatic imagery – is that what allows for different shades of blooming echo are different orientations to each digital enclosure: we are mapping the conditions of our bodies' blurred possibility, the location and angle of the hard yet hidden walls that shift the flow of our thinking and acting as listeners.

The solid-liquid relation also helps unfold the living-dead, dead-living paradox proliferated by the deadWIP concept. *The Sound of Listening* keeps the jury hung about how what's flowing will turn what it reveals as husky enclosure to dust – how we might wash our dead bodies out to sea. Cox's weaving of our often untapped, disparate penchants for space travel makes such a vaguely linear causality of canyon-inspired erosion obvious and useful, or alien and menacing depending on where we are and what we're tending to sound/draw/map like. Online listeners can shift at moments notice from room to room and from musically activated/living space to (nearly) dormant abstract space/body; the score for Kathryn Schulmeister and Juliana Gaona-Villamizar calls for rapid tremolos of dizzying space travel between enclosures/modes of reverberation; Cox and Douglas Ewart take a didgeridoo on loops from the edge of a digital wall to the twilight of mystery object-produced-dead-spaces scattered about the listening map, co-echolocating once impossible overtone harmonies.

In the midst of blurred-out explorations of a specific verb, sharp cuts or tremolos between rooms become particularly salient – like terraced dynamics or sudden formal drum breaks embedded in the coding of Cox's universe. I hear them as transductions of Chang's interjection about "labor": the work of navigation and map making is suddenly uncovered in glitches – a flickering revelation of the often

hidden sweat produced by moving our bodies between listening orientations and mapping their potential. Suddenly I hear my own listening labor go sweaty too: a straining towards viscous understanding woven bitterly with a straining towards an openness facile enough to cut across language-codes in warp speed. A subtle self-analytic gesture emerges in these moments. Ad-hoc habits loop stringy across the diagrams that enclose their possibility, de-coding the hieroglyphs of innermost-selves. I learn by repetition exercises now, following Cox and Ewart back and forth, plotting my own loops between the echolalia that build my pre-imagined listener-sound/personality.

Danger lurks if these echo games catch and tremble at the edge of action, burrowing in like palilalia. But the actions I build an understanding of never trace sound-circles around a tragic recline. Those cuts and reverb tremolos allow life to be found anew in alternate dimensions: the verticality of musical harmony, the grain of zoom video improvisations-in-progress, the rhythm of Gaona-Villamizar and her English horn discovering a resonant frequency that beats intensely like distortion. A work-in-progress worship of death – that tempting psychedelic flow towards an out of reach ego/world/knowledge death - is warded off in the distant, hypothetical, pre-verb floating beyond the hieroglyphic room walls. It wafts in and out of the mise en scène via memory or fantasy spaceships like an incommensurate, abstract thought flower.

Try smuggling one of these colorful, poisonous sounding plants into the ambience of one of Cox's rooms. You'll see it has no particular trouble growing – especially if you pick a reverb animated by field recordings of the rainforest. This kind of agentic listen-gardening makes us aware of our listening's edginess with regard to sense and understanding, touch and thought – the epiphonics of "reverb" misunderstood into doubled grammars of a subject, "verb", object clause. We become little fables of our own ear's vestibular pyramid – that organ where the acoustic nerve emerges secretly at the end of a bony labyrinth. Sense out the periosteum (membrane) of the vestibule, listen in to that balancing technology as it hums along, guiding us as we walk tenderly along the tight ropes Cox weaves between the abstract and the representational. The brilliance of the resulting music is its ability to allow our various WIPs to die unexpectedly, to encourage us to move along new precarious threadings, to map the terrain we disc over transmorphing around us, to allow our deadWIPs to be reborn, defined again.

SAMUEL YULSMAN IS A COMPOSER, PIANIST, AND WRITER CURRENTLY BASED IN MIAMI, FL.

JESSIE COX
IN CONVERSATION WITH
BONAVENTURE SOH BEJENG NDIKUNG

Bonaventure Ndikung → *[Listening to performance recording over Zoom] What are you playing there?*

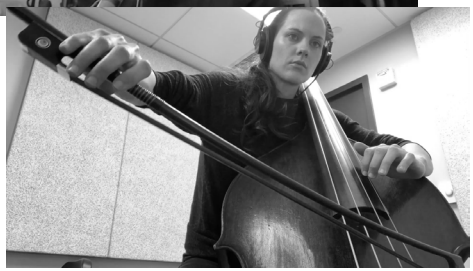
Jessie Cox → So that was Douglas playing—Douglas Ewart. That was our collaboration. He was playing and I was moving him around in the space. And basically what happens, the room is just activated with those birds [and environmental sounds], for example. But when you play certain frequencies, you can hear how some of them linger more than others, and that's simply because of the resonance of the room. So what I gave the musicians is some written music—some have written music, some just have descriptions of the rooms—and then when they go in the room they encounter things that don't sound and things that sound. They're sort of getting to know the space that they're in.

Ndikung → *So if I understand properly, it is the way the space conditions not only the instrument but also the sonic manifestation of what is played. So kind of thinking with or through spatial sonority.*

Cox → Yeah for example, [in] the one with Douglas I'm kind of like a tour guide. And he's really amazing with that stuff. He's really an intuitive improviser with the space around him and his environment. And you can tell, you know, you can hear how he can create certain sounds and let them ring and find immediately the voice of the birds and things like that. Then I have these two musicians, they play written pieces—the oboe piece at the beginning I showed you [for example]. So what is interesting is it kind of works that I explore two rooms in different ways and certain frequencies will just stay and resonate, others won't. You can make these really strange shapes and things. Normally when we record, acousticians try to make the room flat and neutral and make it disappear. And basically what this is, is the other extreme. I created rooms that have these kinds of responses. That means you have to play your instrument differently, and that also means speed is different in every space, and then also you can move around, and when you move around you suddenly make music that is

made through spatial parameters rather than [just] time. Because to move from here to here [gestures to two different points in space] is something we normally don't have in music. We normally say to move from here to here means time, but from here to here is not time, it's a spatial thing. It takes time, but that can be varied.

Ndikung → *Except if you're Manu Dibangor and you're playing the sax moving from one end of the stage to the other.*



Cox → Right, exactly.

Ndikung → *So what becomes very interesting to me is, you know, since we were thinking also about Halim El-Dabh, is thinking about the sculpting of sound. In this case the right or the ability to sculpt the sound is not left in the hands of the musician alone who's playing. The space sculpts the sound alone, right? That's something I'm picking up on from what I'm hearing.*

Cox → That's right. I think in some musical traditions that has always been the case, which is that the space is important to the sound of the music. And this is fundamentally important to this piece. Furthermore, the making of the space itself is actually part of the work.

Ndikung → *When we were doing documenta there was something that happened that stayed with me. We had to do the piece—the composition that Emeka Ogboh did in a space in Athens. A few months [before] the opening of the exhibition, we lost [the original] space because it became too expensive. And so the only space available to do this nobody wanted because it was in the conservatoire in an amphitheater that had a very difficult, very long, echo—how do you call it again in music—like fading time. It was just difficult. You couldn't show a video there because by the time the second person started talking you [could still] hear the echo of the first person. What Emeka did to solve the problem was to bring the choir he was working with to do the piece in that space—the measured fading time was 12 seconds—and he could solve the problem by integrating that echo into the piece. So you sing one [line] and then you start with [the next] only after the dying of the echo—so to think about how the space conditions [sound]. And basically I remember telling the co-curators that if there's one person that could work with this space, in any case we didn't have another option, it would be Emeka, somebody who comes from Lagos where there is no "perfect" space for sound. It's always dealing with other sounds or the heterogeneity of space and not the homogeneity of space. Not uniform space, like well-tempered sound space, but working with that kind of heterogeneity of space. I found that interesting.*

Cox → Yeah, and then the next part is that since now this is online a side effect is that we can travel [through space] really fast. So like, from this type of speed of decay [gestures to one "room"] to this one over here [gestures to another], you know, you can switch back and forth with one button, which is kind of crazy because you hear one acoustic and then in the next second, the next one. Normally we don't do that.

Ndikung → *So is it an erasure of the space of decay and time?*

Cox → No actually, because I mean, it depends, you can theoretically run away from [the decay]. So there's two ways to move, there's two possibilities, right? One is you move [through the map] as a dot, which has a fixed speed of movement. And one is that you travel through a portal to another room with a single button. Now, each one of those rooms has a different decay rate, speed of decay, right? As well, of course, it has different sonic resonances, frequency resonances, it has also a different speed of decay. And as such, as you said, different sonic gestural materials work or happen in it.

Now you can only cut the decay by either "living" right next to the border [of a room] and moving over right away, or by teleporting from one [room] to another, which is [executed by use of] a button. Now if you do that, you will hear that you're jumping because you can hear quite strongly, even before it decays, how much decay each room has—there's this wetness to the sound. And we're really good at hearing that speed of the decay. Take the yellow room made from the steel drum, for example, we tell immediately that it's much drier than room 1.

Ndikung → *I was also thinking of another anecdote—which I'm sharing with you just to understand how the whole thing functions—which is an experiment that Sam Auinger did in Switzerland a few years ago doing field recordings on two different farms next to each other. One was a farm with genetically modified [crops] and the other with non-genetically modified. Each one had a completely different sound just because the genetically modified [crops] are standardized; [in the field recordings] they're sterile sounding. The sound was completely different from the one that had leaves of different sizes, plants of different heights and so on and so forth. Very simple experiment. But in terms of spatiality and of course, you know, the manipulation of what you find in space, it becomes very interesting.*

Cox → Well, that's why I wanted to put living things into the rooms. You have to make it alive. And there is also the other aspect of life, which is the story. So this is why I always say that we are building this while the piece happens. When the musicians enter these spaces what becomes apparent is that each room has its own [character of movement] within it. And this is related to how it sounds and what is made possible by it as well as who [moved through that space] before you. This is why I have two pieces that are composed, which are sort of the first two movements; in other words they're written out, and come from me exploring the space by myself and analyzing it. Then out of that I made material for different people so they can study it. I wanted to think about different kinds of ways you can study a place—that would be sort of like learning about maybe the fauna or the history of a place or something. Whereas if you just look at the frequency resonances it's almost like you're just seeing mountains on a map. So it's a very different relationship. And then there's this whole process of getting to know the space that you have to do when you're a musician and play in it because everything you do is different. That means you're different, right? Because your voice changes in every room and everything is completely different in how you usually create sound since each sound is transformed by the spaces one is in. I'm going to bow the cymbals once on my head, and then also not on my head. And these

I WANTED TO THINK ABOUT DIFFERENT KINDS OF WAYS YOU CAN STUDY A PLACE—THAT WOULD BE SORT OF LIKE LEARNING ABOUT MAYBE THE FAUNA OR THE HISTORY OF A PLACE OR SOMETHING.

cymbals are actually then the spaces. Douglas Ewart, you heard. So that relationship, for example, is me turning him and him turning me. So I'm turning through the movement and he's turning me through the sounds that he chooses, because that's another dimensional direction. And then two performers are playing written-out pieces, which is very much thought through the space and what it's saying—trying to understand the space and trying to get to know the space, which does have a little of a scientific thing to it as well, which I think is also sometimes important.

Ndikung → *In what way?*

Cox → In the sense that frequencies were analyzed by me and used, then, to create gestures where certain frequencies—I would know that they would linger longer than others. It's almost like figuring out the routing of a river or something.

And then these two same musicians will perform a piece where they're traveling on their own and improvising. They will also know of course the stuff that happens in the rooms. And they will sort of meet each other and have different kinds of meeting moments. Then there's the last component, which is a friend of mine who is a rapper who transforms his voice. Because the question of bodies is, to me, very important in relation to the room—that is transforming your body through the sound of the voice. You know, the sound of the voice is associated with of course what kind of material we are. So that connection is very important, and means if you change rooms you change your sound. It means you're actually changing your makeup, you know, everything about you.

Ndikung → *So why was it important to have the cymbal on the head?*

Cox → Because, to me, it had to do with the question of bodies. It wasn't about spaces outside of the body, it was actually space as in the body. And then it's also imagined—like I imagined these spaces partially with that instrument. These are not neutral spaces. Me and my collaborators make them the way that we make them for a reason, and the things that we tell in them, through them, are not random. To make that space is to change my body. There's something about like me trying to make sound through affecting the shape of my body, of myself.

Ndikung → *Several things there. So on the one hand, we're talking about a body that produces and alters sound, and also re-*

ceives sound. The body as a meter, as taking up the sound, and the body as—you know, what would be the word—something that intervenes.

Cox → Or interjects.

Ndikung → *Interjects, that's the word interjects—alters with the movement in the space, with just being in the space, there's a certain interjection. We can extrapolate from that and make all kinds of relations within our society, but you know, even within that sonic space it becomes very interesting to look at a body. And then there's something about the fact that the body is no longer a metaphor, then, it's real. I'm also thinking about the symbol on the head as an extension or kind of a manipulation of the body as well, you know? So by having it there, there is a different resonance of the body because you have the cymbal on the head. There's so much happening there, which I would like to think a bit more about.*

SO ON THE ONE HAND, WE'RE TALKING ABOUT A BODY THAT PRODUCES AND ALTERS SOUND, AND ALSO RECEIVES SOUND. THE BODY AS A METER, AS TAKING UP THE SOUND, AND THE BODY AS—YOU KNOW, WHAT WOULD BE THE WORD—SOMETHING THAT INTERVENES.

Cox → It's funny that you came to "interjections", because that's what I call my friend's—Allen Chang, who is the rapper—his part, "interjections". And I mean, he's the voice, he uses the voice. And he will also actually—I guess I call it "destroy" but I don't mean it in only a negative sense—he will destroy this world. I was thinking since his practice is cyborgian, you know, like it has to do with electronic manipulation of himself, it seemed only fitting that he would be a being in this drama that could actually dismantle and rearrange this whole universe.

Ndikung → *Yes. Let's take a minute to talk about the voice. Because you mentioned that the voice can be used as a marker for [perceived] gender or even race. It can also of course be a marker for age. But there's something about—I'm thinking about losing one's voice in the sense that a fundamental element is gone. But what if I were to speak now with your voice? I'm thinking in that space of the cyborg, the kind of manipulation that can go on.*

I was just talking to a colleague of mine today who's a poet, and we were talking about finding one's voice—especially in relation to the work of Kamau Brathwaite, the poet from Barbados, who in a lecture was talking about how he found his voice in poetry. He said when he went to school they were teaching all of these poems from England and so on and so forth. And one day he heard a tornado, and he said: The tornado doesn't strike in pentameter, in iambic pentameter, which was the kind of voice he was trained to use. That's how he could understand that he had to write poetry that related to that voice of the tornado, of the sea—because he would talk about listening to the sea—or even the light from that reflected from the sea into his room. That space really mattered. And he went on to say—because he was thinking very much about the Caribbean islands—what song would God have been singing when he threw the stones to make those islands? So this idea of the voice becomes very important.

I'm looking at this from a sociological, socio-political point of view, right, because you're constantly trained to speak with somebody else's voice, [and in this] space matters. If you're born within a certain space, you speak some other person's voice, which is of course "the culture" and so the way it frames you. And he spoke in that lecture about intimacy, you know, because he had to learn how to write poetry about his grandfather, his grandmother, and his uncle—a certain intimacy. He said when he went to the UK, the first poem he wrote was about what he experienced as an incredible trauma when he couldn't hear the sound of snow. While in the Caribbean when rain falls, you know, with all the metal roofs, there's all this sound. So when it snowed and he couldn't hear anything he was completely traumatized. So he wrote a poem about how the snow falls and hits, and the layers of it. And actually, what made the jury choose that

poem was because he wrote about it in another voice. It wasn't the voice of the British person who might ignore the kind of subtlety of the sound, or the lack thereof, when it snowed. So this idea of the voice leads me to all these things; one's own voice, finding one's own voice.

Cox ⟶ I love it. It's beautiful. And something that struck me now, again, is space travel. Because what makes Brathwaite being in England unusual is the compression of a distance—by virtue of someone who is entangled with one space and migrating to another.

Ndikung ⟶ *The spaces collapse. Very interesting. Let me just add something to that, in relation to space and space traveling. If one were in it physically, an addition is also the temperature and of course what you talked about, the wetness and the dryness in that space, right? So the longer I stay in that space, and the more I move from A to B in that space, the more I breathe, the wetter the space becomes, which has an influence on the sound within that space. The longer I stay there, the more I produce heat through the energy that's being used, the warmer the space becomes. All those things have an impact. It's a multidimensional way of looking at spatiality, which must incorporate temperature, humidity, time and so on and so forth.*

If I had written the piece already I wouldn't have, you know, completely missed the video and everything. So I was just about to write something, and the provisional title I was working on was called: "Striving, Variating, Convoking: Perceiving the World, and there was a Work in it, of Jessie Cox." In that, of course, my point of departure was the experience of listening and watching you do the thing at the "Afro-Modernism in Contemporary Music" symposium and listening to you talk, and a few peculiarities in the performance that caught my attention. So thinking about, you know, the drumset as a conglomeration of different spaces, or actually different bodies, I really wanted to take some time to write about what happens when one explores that space. So when it's the metal, you know, when you went around and you were doing those sounds, or if you're beating—I wanted to write about that. I also wanted to write about [your] mask. So I had taken a few notes for what I wanted to write about: performance, performativity, the mask, your text. Then another note I wrote about: "It wasn't the compulsiveness of Max Roach, although it was a tribute to him. It wasn't the hands or the arms playing the drumset, nor only the foot or the legs tapping the pedals. It was the whole body. It wasn't the wrist, nor the ankles, nor the elbows or knees acting as the pivots for momentum, but the navel, the gut, abdomen." So these are my notes of what I wanted to write.

I mean, I'm interested in what is being convoked in such a space. And that is the fact that whoever [enters] into that space leaves something—so if you come into the space, you're also calling upon the presence of the others that have been in that space. That's one form of convocation that's happening.

Cox ⟶ There's also the convocation of the future as well—or possible futures.

Ndikung ⟶ *Yes, exactly. Yes, you're convoking something in the future. I really like that.*

BONAVENTURE SOH BEJENG NDIKUNG, PHD IS AN INDEPENDENT ART CURATOR AND BIOTECHNOLOGIST. HE IS FOUNDER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE ART SPACE SAVVY CONTEMPORARY BERLIN AND EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF THE JOURNAL SAVVY JOURNAL FOR CRITICAL TEXTS ON CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART.

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reader 1 of 3