ALVIN LUCIER

Music for Solo Performer. I am Sitting in a Room. Nothing is Real.

Thursday 9th October 9 pm

Pirelli HangarBicocca presents an evening curated by Pedro Rocha with Alvin Lucier who will perform in a concert, on the occasion of the Papagaio exhibition by João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva.

Alvin Lucier’s scripted scores are apparently simple propositions addressing the interaction and mutual interference of different systems, propelled by a fascination for the sound, hearing and acoustic phenomena. Like Gusmão and Paiva’s Cameras Obscursa, they point to the unfathomable vitality of the matter and to the ancestral relations human beings established with it. Lucier’s singular poetics can thus offer us musical instruments sounding by themselves in the presence of a static performer, a text that is eaten up and chewed by the space where it is recited, dissipating it in the immensity of the acoustics interplay, or a ventriloquist teapot interpreting its version of a song by The Beatles. His explorations of sound phenomena, as Gusmão and Paiva’s focus on daily life aspects or actions, introduce us to a world that expands beyond the surface of things, their functional use, interpretative intentionality or aesthetic codings. “I guess I’m trying to help people to hold shells up to their ears and listen to the ocean again”, he once said. (Pedro Rocha)

Texts by Alvin Lucier

Music for Solo Performer (1965)

The idea for Music for Solo Performer (1965) came out of a series of conversations I had in 1964 with physicist Edmond Dewan of the Air Force Cambridge Research Laboratory in Bedford, Massachusetts. At that time, Dewan was engaged in brain wave research particularly as it pertained to flying: it was believed that certain periodic visual rhythms of slow propeller speeds were locking onto corresponding brainwave frequencies of aircraft pilots, causing dizziness, blackouts, and epileptic fits. Dewan, an accomplished amateur organist, was eager to share his ideas and equipment with any composer interested in exploring this hitherto uncharted region. Inspired by the imagery and technology of electroencephalography, I immediately set to work to discover all I could about alpha.

Working long hours alone in the Brandeis University Electronic Music Studio with Dewan’s equipment (two Tektronix Type 122 preamplifiers in series, one Model 330M Kronhite band pass Filter, which had been set for a range of from 9 to 15 Hz, one integrating threshold switch, electrodes, appropriate connectors, etc.) plus the studio’s conventional equipment, I learned to produce alpha fairly consistently. I found that success could be attained by setting the gain on the audio amplifier to a point just below oscillation so that even a relatively weak alpha signal would come through. Often, I could produce alpha only in short bursts; it took precisely the right physical and psychological conditions to sustain it in longer phrases. I did not attempt any experiments in bio-feedback as such but was aware of the reinforcement of my own alpha-producing ability while monitoring in real-time the sounds that came out of the studio loudspeakers. I observed that over long periods of time, for example while recording alpha for storage material for use in performances, or when tired, relaxed, or slightly bored, the alpha would tend to drift somewhat downward and settle.

From the beginning, I was determined to make a live performance work despite the delicate uncertainty of the equipment, difficult to handle even under controlled laboratory conditions. I realized the value of the EEG situation as a theatre element and knew from experience that live sounds are more interesting than taped ones. I was also touched by the image of the immobile if not paralyzed human being who, by merely changing states of visual attention, can activate a large configuration of communication equipment with what appears to be power from a spiritual realm. I found the
alpha’s quiet thunder extremely beautiful and, instead of spoiling in by processing, chose to use it as an active force in the same way one uses the power of a river.

I used the alpha to resonate a large battery of percussion instruments including cymbals, gongs, bass drums, timpani, and other resonant found objects. In most cases, it was necessary physically to couple the loudspeaker to the instrument, although in the case of highly resonant bass drums and timpani, the loudspeaker could be an inch or so away. Placing loudspeakers in trashcans or cardboard boxes worked extremely well as did using cheap small speakers face down on snare drums or taped against windows. I learned that by varying both short bursts and longer sustained phrases of alpha plus making musical decisions as to placement of loudspeakers, choice of resonant instruments of objects, volume control, channeling and mixing, I was able to get a wide variety of sonorities as well as retain the natural physical quality that seemed asked for by the sound source itself.

I am Sitting in a Room (1969)

One day during the fall of 1968 I bumped into Edmond Dewan in the hallway of the Brandeis Music Department. Dewan was an imaginative scientist working for the United States Air Force at nearby Hanscomb Field. In 1965 he had lent me his brain apparatus in the hopes that I would use it in a musical composition. I followed up on his offer and composed Music for Solo Performer (1965) for enormously amplified alpha waves and percussion. In casual conversation Dewan remarked that a professor at MIT named Bose had just given a lecture during in which he described a way of testing a loudspeaker he was designing. He recycled sounds into his speakers to hear if their responses were flat. That’s all I remember of our conversation. I picked up on the idea and decided to make some preliminary experiments in one of the practice rooms at Brandeis. I made sounds of various kinds and recycled them into the room over and over again.

During the spring of 1969 I was living in an apartment on 454 High Street, Middletown, Connecticut. I was teaching at Wesleyan at the time. One night I borrowed two Nagra tape recorders from the Music Department. I had a Beyer microphone, a single KLH loudspeaker and a Dynaco amplifier. I set the mike up in the living room, sat down in an armchair and wrote out a text that explained what I was about to do. I decided that the work would have no poetic or aesthetic content. The art was someplace else.

I read the text into the microphone, recording it as I did so. I then played the recording back into the room, making a copy of the original. I repeated this procedure until I had sixteen versions, one original and fifteen copies. I stayed up all night doing it. As the process continued more and more of the resonances of the room came forth; the intelligibility of the speech disappeared. Speech became music. It was magical.

Nothing is Real (1990)

In the Spring of 1990, Aki Takahashi asked me to write an arrangement of a Beatles song for her. She had just finished recording the complete piano music of Satie for Toshiba-EMI, the success of which had prompted them to ask for a collection of Lennon and McCartney tunes. She agreed, on the condition that she could invite composers of her own choosing to write the arrangements. Not wanting to pin myself down to a specific song, memory or feeling, I asked her to choose one for me. She selected Strawberry Fields Forever. When I asked why she chose that particular song, she replied that the line, “nothing is real,” reminded her of my music.

During this work, fragments of the melody are played and sustained as clusters. The performance is recorded on a digital recorder. The recorded fragments are played back through a small loudspeaker hidden inside a teapot. During the playback, the lid of the pot is raised and lowered, changing the resonance characteristics of the pot. Twice during the performance the pot itself is lifted off the lid of the piano, causing the resonances to disappear completely.

Nothing is Real was commissioned by Toshiba-EMI Ltd., Japan, and is included on their Eastworld Compact Disc, TOCE-6655, Hyper Beatles 2. It was written expressly for Aki Takahashi.