
A DIFFERENT SOUND IN EACH EAR

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'If one could measure the leaps that the attention took, the exertion of the eye-muscles, the pendulum-movements of the psyche, and all the efforts that a human being must make in order to keep himself vertical in the flux of the street, then presumably—so he had thought, and had toyed with trying to calculate the incalculable—the result would be a quantity compared with which the force that Atlas needed to hold the world up was trivial, and one could imagine the enormous output of energy, nowadays, of even a man who was doing nothing at all'.
Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*

ON THE 27th OF MAY 1969, the composer Steve Reich presented *Pendulum Music* (1968) as part of the exhibition *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The piece consists of four microphones, suspended from the ceiling, which are pulled back and released 'like a swing', creating sonic feedback each time they pass the loudspeakers laid flat on the floor.¹ *Pendulum Music* was performed with the artists Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, Michael Snow and the musician James Tenney, showing the composer's involvement with visual art at that time. Described by Reich as an 'audible sculpture', the work also illustrates his concern with the spatial dimension of his music.² This essay is conceived as a dialogue between *Pendulum Music* and works by some of the artists exhibiting in *Various Small Fires*. It will consider how Reich's piece can help us to understand these works as spaces in which conversations between different temporalities are established. Indirectly, it will also envisage *Pendulum Music* as a curatorial model for the exhibition *Various Small Fires*: the combination of different pendulums that swing with their own rhythm.

Pendulum Music is emblematic of Reich's interest in the notion of musical process, as opposed to composition, which he develops in his 1968 manifesto, *Music as a Gradual Process*, first published in the *Anti-Illusion* exhibition catalogue.³ In this text, Reich uses the figure of the pendulum to define his approach to music: 'performing and listening to a gradual musical process resembles ... pulling back a swing, releasing it, and observing it gradually come to rest.'⁴ In the context of *Anti-Illusion*, the piece was part of a programme of performances named 'extended time pieces'. It was an important component in the curators' reflection on the notion of time, highlighting the fact that 'actual time is a crucial factor' and that there is 'no illusion of temporality' in Reich's music.⁵ In the article *Subject Matter* (1969),

1. Steve Reich, *Pendulum Music* (1968), score, Universal Edition, London, 1980, unpaginated.

2. Steve Reich, *Writings on Music, 1965–2000*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2002, p. 95.

3. Steve Reich, 'Music as a Gradual Process', in James Monte, Marcia Tucker, (eds.), *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* (exhibition catalogue), Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1969, pp. 56–57.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 56–57.

5. Marcia Tucker, 'Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials', in James Monte, Marcia Tucker, (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 35–36.

Dan Graham links the specific temporality developed by *Pendulum Music* to the spatial dimension of the installation: 'the work's time isn't metronomic or progressive in the usual sense, unlike most musical structure; there is no playing against time (rather the work is in time—the natural time-space defined by the physical situation: friction against gravity, etc.).'⁶ Through the repeated motion of the four microphones, *Pendulum Music* spatialises time. The movements of the pendulums exemplify the merging of time and space within the same continuum. In the same way, each feedback produced by the interference between a microphone and a loudspeaker puts forward a specific point within this continuum: a suspended time and space resulting from the interaction between many temporal and spatial directions.

Dominique Petitgand's installation *Quelqu'un par terre* (2006) has a similar approach to time and space. Presented in several adjacent rooms, the installation juxtaposes different sounds meant to be experienced successively. In the first room, four loudspeakers transmit the repeated bangs of a metal chair violently thrown to the floor. A second space, permeated by the sound coming from the first room, houses a single speaker emitting a fragmented narrative told by a child: 'quelqu'un par terre', 'attends', 'ça va passer'.⁷ The fragments of speech and the sounds of the crashing chairs share precisely the same rhythm, duration and intonation. The installation plays with the superimposition of several synchronised sounds and the viewer's journey through them. It also exemplifies the ability of sound to create different spatial environments. The sound of chairs being thrown fills the first room as no other material would do, while in the second room the fragments of narratives form an intimate space. The use of repetitions and silences also contributes to the physical dimension of his sound pieces: 'the echo of what has happened occupying the terrain before something else chases it away'.⁸ This interest in the relationships that sound develops with space also determines Petitgand's approach to recording. The sounds that he uses carry with them the evidence of the spatial environment in which they have been recorded, allowing the artist to 'play on distances, proximity, resonances, echoes'.⁹ In the same way, the hesitations, breathing, coughs or marginal noises that literally surround speech have an important role in Petitgand's use of voices and in his understanding of sound as a material. They lend corporeality to the sound and render a presence in the room.

Petitgand's use of marginal sounds can be compared to the marks and notes made around a text. They both trace the experiences of reading and listening, punctuating their temporality. Existing as a facsimile of Virginia Woolf's book *A Room of One's Own*, Kajsa Dahlberg's work *A Room of One's Own/A Thousand Libraries* (2006) compiles all the margin notes

6. Dan Graham, *Rock My Religion*, MIT Press, 1993, p. 46.

7. 'someone on the ground', 'wait', 'it'll pass'.

8. Dominique Petitgand, Guillaume Désanges, 'Interview—stimuli', in Dominique Petitgand,

Notes, voix, entretiens / Notes, Voices, Interviews, Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, ENSBA, Paris, 2003, p. 108.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

made by readers in the Swedish editions of Woolf's book found in public libraries in Sweden. The work considers the underlinings, comments and notes left on the pages as a way of creating private space within the book: 'the act of reading becomes a part of the text itself ... the note is nothing but a trace of an experience, not necessarily something that can be understood by the next person'.¹⁰ Reproduced in a single book, the accumulation of notes visualises the multiple layers of experiences. Dahlberg's work is conceived as a palimpsest, an accumulative space where different temporalities have merged. Made during the private time of reading, these margin notes also constitute a collective experience, a 'seminar of voices'.¹¹

Pendulum Music's score—a short text describing how to play the piece—specifies that the feedback produced by the microphones passing above the loudspeakers will be 'in unison or not'.¹² This 'or not' appears to be a crucial element in the performance of the piece: if the four microphones start their movements in unison, they gradually shift out of phase with one another. Their rhythms in combination create a multitude of simultaneous patterns, based on the co-existence of different times within the same work. Reich's interest in the juxtaposition of varying temporalities, which is at the core of his music from that period, began in 1965 with a series of tape pieces, including *It's Gonna Rain* (1965) and *Come Out* (1966). Each piece uses two identical tape loops—short excerpts of speeches—played with a slight variation in the speed of the two players, allowing the loops to 'slowly shift out of phase with each other'.¹³ By the play of a 'loop against itself', the works establish a gap in time, generating additional rhythmic patterns. In a text written in connection with *It's Gonna Rain*, the musician expresses the physical experience created by this disjunction: 'the sensation I had in my head was that the sound moved over to my left ear, down to my left shoulder, down to my left arm, down my leg, across the floor to the left, ... and then it started going the other way and came back together in the centre of my head'.¹⁴ The gap produced by the overlapping temporalities emerges as a disjunction within the listener's perception, resulting in an awareness of his or her physical situation.

Petitgand employs the superimposition of different temporalities in a number of works: 'musically, it is important for me that several different flows be overlaid at different speeds; there should be a kind of egotism of the different parts, refusing to get along'.¹⁵ These pieces can be considered as the gathering, within a single work, of different components that possess their individual temporalities, without attempting to reconcile them. They also bring the variations of the listener's perception into play. Talking about

10. Kajsa Dahlberg, Niklas Östholm, *Kajsa Dahlberg in a conversation with Niklas Östholm*, Index, Stockholm, 2007, pp. 4–5.

11. Kajsa Dahlberg, Niklas Östholm, *ibid.*, p. 4.

12. Steve Reich, *Pendulum Music*, op. cit., unpaginated.

13. Steve Reich, *Writings On Music 1965–2000*, p. 20.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

15. Dominique Petitgand, Guillaume Désanges, 'Interview—stimuli', in Dominique Petitgand, op. cit., p. 109.

the piece *On le retrouvera* (1995), Petitgand explores the result of this overlapping of times: 'just as two very close tones can form a third music, here two parallel narratives overlap. These are exactly the kind of frictions that interest me. ... Sometimes it pulls out of sync, anticipates the beat, precipitates it, stops it or slows it down. In my pieces I always play on this kind of rupture or release, which corresponds to the movements of our thought.'¹⁶

Laurent Montaron's *Spit* (2003) develops this disjunction between different times on a visual level. The piece uses a slide projection — a woman, sitting on the parapet of a balcony in New York, captured in the act of spitting. The artist placed a large fan in front of the projector's lens. Its blades make the still image flicker, creating the impression of cinematographic motion. The work relies on a tension between two temporalities, between the stillness of the picture and the motion established by the fan's rotating blades passing in front of the projector's lens. No compromise is possible between the two states, they are bound to co-exist without being able to synchronise.

On a different level, his sound installation *Sans Titre* (2006), realised in collaboration with an orchestra, also proceeds from a disjunction between different times. Over the ten-minute period of the recording, Montaron asked the musicians to tune their instrument to a note — given by him — that gradually changed while they were tuning. Starting with the 'A' note, Montaron took the orchestra through nearly all the possible tones they could produce. The orchestra attempted to tune on the fluctuating note, failing to play harmoniously and emitting a sound mass made of discordant glissandos — a multitude of voices that converse without being able to agree. The installation consists of the recorded sounds played back on a dodecahedral loudspeaker, spatially rendering in the exhibition space the sounds produced by the various instruments.

In both *Pendulum Music* and his essay *Music as a Gradual Process*, Reich emphasizes the importance of the impersonal character of his music. *Music as a Gradual Process* states that 'once the process is set up and loaded, it runs by itself'.¹⁷ *Pendulum Music*'s score invites the performers, once they have released the microphones, to 'sit down to watch and listen to the process along with the audience' and the piece is 'ended sometime after all mikes have come to rest'.¹⁸ The performers activate a process whose elements, in this case the four pendulums, follow their own time-space continuums, their own rhythms. They set up a conversation between the pendulums. The passage from unison to 'or not' — a passage that Graham designates as from 'equilibrium ... in the direction of a maximal disorder' — shows that this conversation is never resolved.¹⁹ *Pendulum Music* sets up a

16. Dominique Petitgand, Guillaume Désanges, 'Dominique Petitgand listens to his work', in Dominique Petitgand, op. cit., p. 115.

17. Steve Reich, 'Music as a Gradual Process', in James Monte, Marcia Tucker, (eds.), op. cit., pp. 56–57

18. Steve Reich, *Pendulum Music*, unpaginated.

paradoxical relationship between the impersonal aspect of the work and the disorder of the conversation that it engages.

Echoing Reich's concern with the notion of the impersonal, Petitgand is explicit about his recurrent use of lists of words and his interest in the paradox between, on one hand, an impersonal process, and on the other hand, the richness of its effects: 'I like it when opposites struggle within the same form. ... The list denies syntax; it places words with different value on the same level. It's an arbitrary flattening than can be exceptionally violent. ... With my lists, I try to convey an emotion with the most arid resources, to tell the most possible with the least possible. I think that my pieces give some account of the violence of the list when it becomes a narrative.'²⁰ This violence of the list, of the impersonal, can be linked to the paradox that Roland Barthes sees in the notion of the 'Neutral': 'for me, the Neutral doesn't refer to "impressions" of greyness, of "neutrality", of indifference. The Neutral—my Neutral—can refer to intense, strong, unprecedented states', and further, 'the desire for the Neutral continually stages a paradox: as an object, the Neutral means suspension of violence; as a desire, it means violence.'²¹

At one point during a session of his one-year course dedicated to the 'Neutral', Barthes uses the game of the Chinese portrait—if the 'Neutral' were a country, an animal, a type of food, etc. ... what would it be?—as an attempt to draw a hypothetical portrait of the notion.²² Supposing we were asked the question 'if the Neutral were a piece of music, what would it be?', this essay would answer: '*Pendulum Music*', having in mind the image of the four performers listening, alongside the audience, to the intense dialogue between the pendulum movements of the microphones. Relying on an impersonal process that results in clashes between disjointed temporalities, *Pendulum Music* stages the violence of the impersonal. Like Petitgand's sound pieces, Dahlberg's book and Montaron's installations, Reich's piece exemplifies the capacity of a work to be the space for different rhythms, different voices—a space for an infinite conversation.

19. Dan Graham, 'Subject Matter', in Dan Graham, op. cit., p. 46.

20. Dominique Petitgand, Guillaume Désanges, 'Interview—stimuli', in Dominique Petitgand, op. cit., p. 109.

21. Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, p. 7 and p. 13.

22. Ibid., p. 85.