

Robert Ashley

Who have you seen in New York?

*I first ran into CAGE. I had his Bank Street address. It was very nice, and you know, very busy. And so we talked shortly and arranged a date for next week.*

He's just a wonderful person.

*Ya, and charming. Then ah, then PHILIP CORNER. I talked with PHILIP CORNER. It was really good, too. Um, he talked so fast I just couldn't understand. He talked like, a motor. He was very profound.*

*And then, oh ya, the KITCHEN. There were people from the KITCHEN. And I talked to JIM BURTON. Then I phoned up STEVE REICH, and he said that he doesn't believe in interviews, because he doesn't believe that what you say first is what you really want to say. But he played his new piece anyway and during that he wrote something for me. At JIM BURTON'S yesterday he told me about your concert with conversations.*

Recently I've been doing things with talking.

*That could be quite inspiring for what I'm doing now.*

It's hard to describe sometimes. I don't have a formula for describing it. It started with my interest in the way my mind works when I go to a concert. It seemed to me that in a concert my mind is never completely tuned to the music. I'm always listening and thinking at the same time. It seemed to me that that division of myself and the imagery involved is an important part of my culture. It's the way music works for me. I rarely experience a kind of intoxication with music, in the sense of losing your identity in the music. I don't experience that.

Also, I got interested in the idea that often there were negative feelings from the audience that could be ascribed to the music or to the musical situation that the composer had made -- we've had this experience since "Sacre du Printemps" -- but that I thought might be negative feelings that come from bringing a group of "negative" people together. I mean, if people go into a musical situation and resist that situation, maybe it's because the music opens up certain channels of feeling and the sickness of the people is expressed in those feelings.

I became aware of how much I was interested in my own self-consciousness. I wanted to welcome that self-consciousness and work with it in order to see through the illusions that were sustaining it.

Most of my music has not been of the kind that makes people comfortable. I haven't meant it to be that way, but that's the way it's come out. My music has always made people self-conscious. People have told me it's an experience they're afraid of. Not that the music made them afraid, but they were afraid of being in that situation of self-consciousness.

*Like in which pieces ?*

*Like the piece you heard in Bremen (Musica Nova Festival, May, 1972: "IN SARA, MENCKEN, CHRIST AND BEETHOVEN THERE WERE MEN AND WOMEN")*

*A single-minded kind of structure.*

That was a "single-minded" kind of structure, yes. But it could happen with other kinds of structures. It could happen with the most "diverse" kind of structure, too. The structure is not the cause. The cause is the self-consciousness in the listener. I don't think the self-consciousness is "bad". If my culture keeps tending to more and more self-consciousness, that will be the basis for a new understanding of music or a new understanding of why you go to listen to music.

I began being interested in a personal sense of how that self-consciousness works and how it manifests itself from moment to moment. I feel that there must be some sort of similarity or simultaneity between the way the music proceeded and the way the self-consciousness proceeded in the audience. Otherwise, it would never have occurred to me to do that music. I got the idea from the culture. The music came out of the culture. I assume that whoever came to hear the music must be having similar feelings and having them simultaneously with the music.

I began thinking of kinds of music that would be transparent to be self-consciousness.

For one thing, I started working with the notion of coincidences. The illusion of coincidence is a peculiar kind of illusion. It's an illusion that has to do with your self-consciousness. I started working with coincidences in a minute sense -- parts of a second. I'd been thinking about those ideas then recently I've had the help of another composer, PAUL DEMARINIS, who has designed some electronic circuits that make it possible for me to realize them. The music you heard in Bremen, "IN SARA, MENCKEN, CHRIST AND BEETHOVEN THERE WERE MEN AND WOMEN", used some of the techniques that came out of the work I've been doing with coincidences.

The piece JIM BURTON was talking about uses self-consciousness in another aspect. (The performance at the KITCHEN was entitled, "YOUR MOVE, I THINK".) That performance was arranged so that the audience could OBSERVE three people talking together, in the way that we try anthropologically to observe humans in their natural behavior. It's a difficult thing to do, (and difficult to perform in), and I think it's only possible in special situations like the KITCHEN provides (and with performers like the two extraordinary people who helped me, ANNE WEHRER and KATHY BEELER.) The idea was just to give the audience the privileges of consciousness that the "eaves-dropper" has. It's a light-hearted piece. But it was a piece FOR an audience, not SHARED with the audience in the way the more recent pieces are.

During any conversation -- like the one we are having now, but it would be particularly more obvious if you could detach yourself from the immediacy of what's being said; for instance, if I were insane -- there's always imagery in your mind that is only remotely connected to what's being said. But you allow the conversation to dominate that imagery. In that sense, conversation is like the consciousness agreements that characterize western music; the audience submits its consciousness and the composer dominates it for a while. The white man's burden. I hoped I could get away from that ideal in myself as a composer and get away from depending on that as THE condition of music.

"YOUR MOVE, I THINK" was one attempt. The

eaves-dropper doesn't give up her self-consciousness.

There is another version of the work with self-consciousness that I have done a number of times with MIMI JOHNSON. Only two people are talking and they "share" the imagery with the audience. As a musical composition it's a very simple process. We talk only at the same time, and we pause at the same time. The starts and stops don't come for grammatical reasons. In fact, I don't know where they come from. Sentences are broken up and left unconcluded. Thoughts are only half-spoken. It's a different kind of conversation. The result is a kind of imagery that seems to be generated "in the room" that has nothing to do with what's being said. The imagery definitely exists in the performer's mind, but it is difficult for me as a performer to know whether the imagery (the "idea") is mine, or whether it comes from another source. I believe that it is a collective imagery, that it is the imagery of the audience and the performers together, and that the performers and the audience are having the same "ideas" simultaneously. It's a very peculiar feeling.

*I should try that once.*

I did a "remote" version of that piece this year for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company: we phoned in our conversation during the performance.

*I read about that, that you were talking in another room and playing the conversation on the stage. And so the dancer had to react to it.*

The music was just THERE. You know, the Cunningham dances. The company dances and you make music. There's no planned connection.

*I see it's a real problem improvising conversations. If you want to . . . . like you. I want to just have a real impression of you, because I don't know what's behind your pieces, ok what the thoughts behind your piece are. So, what's the best way to just let you complete yourself in the conversation? I think that would be just a kind of one-sided conversation, where one asks questions and the other just answers. Where the asking person just like is outside of the whole thing. And I don't know whether this is any good.*

I think it's easier to do it publicly. Then you can stand outside of it. You don't have to see yourself so much. But, you know, if you record conversations with fifty composers in the United States, about their ideas, and if you get into each conversation deeply, then at the end, you'll have one about me and one about Steve and one about Jim Burton, and so on. But you'll have fifty about yourself!

*So you told me now about your project of interviewing and making films during interviews of these persons. Could you explain some of your techniques?*

You mean my plan to document the eight composers on video tape. My idea is to get as entangled with the person I'm interviewing as I can. I'm going to do two hours of video tape about each of the eight composers. One hour will be about the composer's work, a color video tape about the preparation and performance of a recent work. The other hour will be about the person himself or herself, talking with me about his or her ideas. These composers are all my good

friends, and I want to talk in a way that it's easy to do when you have just met somebody. In order to make that feeling possible, the interviews will be done in rather unusual settings. So that we can't come prepared. It should be as easy as we are talking now.

*I've felt that for me there one really different stages of inspiration coming out of myself. I always feel after an interview that I've acted just like a mirror, in the degree of inspiration that I can give. Some people talk and really inspire me into thinking and getting new ideas about the next question. On, with others it can just fade out into a kind of formal, and uninteresting thing. What makes me happiest is when the interchange gets so interesting that the people become very original and themselves.*

I understand. If you let yourself get caught in that illusion of your obligation to the other person, and if the other person is tired or scared or unresponsive or whatever, then you catch yourself always observing the other person. But if you could get around that illusion and if I were unresponsive, you could just talk for the whole time, and that could be as original and as full of insights as if we had known each other for years.

*The funny thing about our conversation is we're not talking about ourselves, but we're conversing about our present conversation. And so I think it's another aspect where you can become original, forgetting yourself within a conversation as completely as possible.*

If you are talking about conversation as we are having right now, then I agree with you. But I was talking about the performance that JIM BURTON saw and about the way I intend to do the video tapes. In the piece that JIM BURTON saw or in the piece I do with MIMI JOHNSON or in the video tapes I'm not concerned at all with originality or with whether I am interesting or whether the other people who are talking are interesting. In fact, sometimes the more interesting the person talking is, the harder it is and the longer it takes to realize that you are actually thinking a thought that has nothing to do with their being interesting. I mean, as a member of the audience you are thinking a thought that is only coincidental or simultaneous with what they are doing. It's not caused by what they are doing or saying. And you can't be sure ever about whether they made the thought or whether you made it. There's always an ocean of imagery that's floating around in the room among everybody.

*So this is a kind of a getting more clarity about your illusions, just saying, "Oh gosh, I projected again," and saying, "Now, no, I'm not going to do that the next time." It's like discovering all your personal illusions in seeing what it is that you now project, or you would like him to say something which you really want to say. It's very good to stage things like that.*

It's very simple. When the performers get used to it, when they understand how much power they have in that situation, it doesn't take any skill at all. All you have to do as a performer is know what you're looking for. Once you know what you're looking for, you discover it's all over the place. It's just there, you know. And what we are doing as performers -- what the piece is about -- is to point out the moments as they pass.

It's as if the performers were psychic perceivers. If they could see manifestations of ghosts, they would be able to point out those manifestations to the audience as they occurred. But that's a special case. Ghosts have spatial or physical realities. What I'm talking about are temporal realities.

I think it's difficult for two people to do alone. It's easier with an audience.

What I will do with the video interviews is another version of this process, but changed because the "audience" during the video recording is imaginary.

*So do you point out the moments where one can test his ideas about their existence in the other person?*

Sometimes, when someone tells you an idea, you realize only then how many times you've thought that idea and how little chance you've had to talk about it. So you want to tell all of your anecdotes about that idea.

*To find out if there is any objectivity in your subjective feelings.*

For me it's a way of talking about the composers

I will be interviewing and to get around all of the boring habits there are in talking. When someone wants to do an interview with you about your music, usually together you make up questions and answers that have nothing to do with the way you think when you make music - "technical" questions. I wanted to make up a new way of talking about music - to talk about the ideas the composer thinks are his or hers.

*Which composers are you going to interview?*

I'll do DAVID BEHRMAN, PHIL GLASS, ALVIN LUCIER, GORDON MUMMA, PAULINE OLIVEROS, ROGER REYNOLDS, TERRY RILEY and LaMONTE YOUNG. They all make a kind of music for which a new kind of consciousness is very important. The music can sustain one moment of consciousness for quite a long time.

*Many people get nervous listening to this music, because they are confronted with themselves, because there is no counterpoint to go to.*

That's right, exactly. It's like being on the desert.

You don't have any choices to make.

#### EXCERPT OF A LETTER

Dear Walter,

The editing took longer than I expected because as it turned out we were performing the ideas we were talking about (...)

It always amazes me when I read a transcript of an interview, because mostly I am under the impression that something has been said that both people understand, and that might make sense to the world at large. ALWAYS it's the opposite.

Anyway, I have put what I thought I was saying and what I intended to say in real English sentences. (...)

Please add at the end of the interview my statement about where the ideas came from. That is important to me. (...)

Sincerely yours,

Robert Ashley

#### STATEMENT

The ideas involved in the conversation pieces come mainly from MARY ASHLEY, SAM ASHLEY, NICK BERTONI, JOHN CAGE, BARBARA CROUSE, PAUL DeMARINIS, MIMI JOHNSON, GEORGE MANUPELLI, and ANNE WEHRER.

FANCY FREE or IT'S THERE

an obstacle illusion program

(ILLUSION MODEL IV)

The performance version of Illusion Model IV occurred to me because of a long friendship with Alvin Lucier. It resembles his pieces in many ways.

The images are my own, of course.

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The Illusion Models were conceived as virtually hypothetical installations in which computers would control sound in such a way that certain effects would be created in the perception of the visitor that otherwise are impossible to achieve.

If the obstacle illusion were to be realized as an installation, then obviously the participant would not need to use a prepared text, nor would the feedback game need to be limited to the four durations prescribed here. The installation (computer) could be programmed to analyze speech patterns in any kind and number of groupings, and the option of changing the program of these groupings could be allowed the speaker on a deeper level of game participation.

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Fancy Free or It's There, a concert version of the obstacle illusion program, uses five performers.

Speaker (male), text options as described.

Four cassette-recorder operators, procedures as described.

Robert Ashley  
December, 1970

INSTRUCTIONS TO PERFORMERS: MALE SPEAKING VOICE

The cassette-machine players will record your speech simultaneously on four tapes, and each of them is obligated to replay various units of the text in which "imperfections" have occurred. Thus, if you stutter or falter (Fancy Free), or if you choose a version of the text that does not conform to the version they are expecting to hear (It's There), one or more of the players will replay that "imperfection" while you are speaking.

You are to repeat the four line statement without regard to the replay interruptions continuously throughout the performance. The performance ends when you have spoken the text from beginning to end without any of it having been replayed.

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The text of FANCY FREE is for speakers who stutter.

The text of IT'S THERE is for speakers who do not stutter.

Each of the texts is to be delivered in a special way.

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FANCY FREE

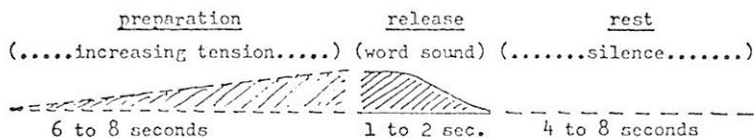
The enunciation of each word is an act in itself, requiring 7 to 10 seconds of preparation and release and separating each word from the following word by a period of 4 to 8 seconds of silence.

For each word, prepare your mouth (physically) for the opening phoneme. Then gradually and forcefully over a period of 6 to 8 seconds build up a diaphragm tension (pressure) that will be released by speaking the word. The word (as a unit, including the opening phoneme and subsequent syllables) should seem to emanate from the moment of release in a natural manner, as though some objective requirement had been satisfied. The word is not to be spoken as though you were being precise for the listener's sake, and no attempt should be made to separate out or emphasize syllables that follow the opening phoneme.

The result should be a word spoken rather loudly, but intact as a word. It is imperative, moreover, that the word seem spoken, not "shouted". In practice, this means (1) the word will be slightly longer than at lower voice levels, but not protracted, and (2) there should be no distortions of the voice caused by the release of tension.

In the case of words beginning with "f" or "s" or "m" the sound of these phonemes should be heard as part of the preparation of the words.

The combination "greyer than" should be treated as one word.



INSTRUCTIONS TO PERFORMERS: MALE SPEAKING VOICE (cont.)

IT'S THERE

Speak slowly and deliberately, but without exaggeration.

Alternative versions of lines 1, 3, and 4 are given in parentheses. For each reading of the four-line text you may vary the wording of the text by choosing among the alternatives.

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CASSETTE MACHINE OPERATORS

The rule of procedure for all players is as follows:

If the delivery of the unit of text to which you are attentive contains "imperfections" then your recording of that unit of text must be replayed as soon as the unit has been completed, (but not until then!)

Machine 1 - the unit is the syllable

Machine 2 - the unit is the word

Machine 3 - the unit is the line

Machine 4 - the unit is the whole text

All machines record until an "imperfection" occurs; then;

Machine 1 - when the syllable containing that imperfection has been completed, rewind to the beginning of that syllable and immediately play back that syllable; as soon as the playback has been given, (at this point the tape will be blank), push in the "record" button and continue recording until the next imperfection is heard.

Machine 2 - when the word containing that imperfection has been completed, rewind to the beginning of that word, and immediately play back that word; as soon as the playback of the word - as delivered by the speaker - has been given (and regardless of what sounds have been recorded from Machine 1), push in the "record" button and continue recording until the next imperfection is heard.

Machine 3 - as with Machine 2, using the line as the unit.

Machine 4 - as with Machine 2, using the four-line text as the unit.

It is important to be as accurate as possible about rewinding the tape to the right place. Still, because of the cascade arrangement of the recorders, it is equally important that the element of uncertainty in the rewinding not be emphasized by any kind of "searching" for the right place. Each operator should establish for himself through practice with a particular machine the greatest possible accuracy about rewind time.

INSTRUCTIONS TO PERFORMERS: CASSETTE MACHINE OPERATORS (cont.)

Definition of "IMPERFECTIONS"

FANCY FREE

1. any stuttering or faltering on the part of the speaker.
2. any voice breaking or distortion as a word is enunciated.
3. any interruption of the sound of the reading of the text by a playback sound.

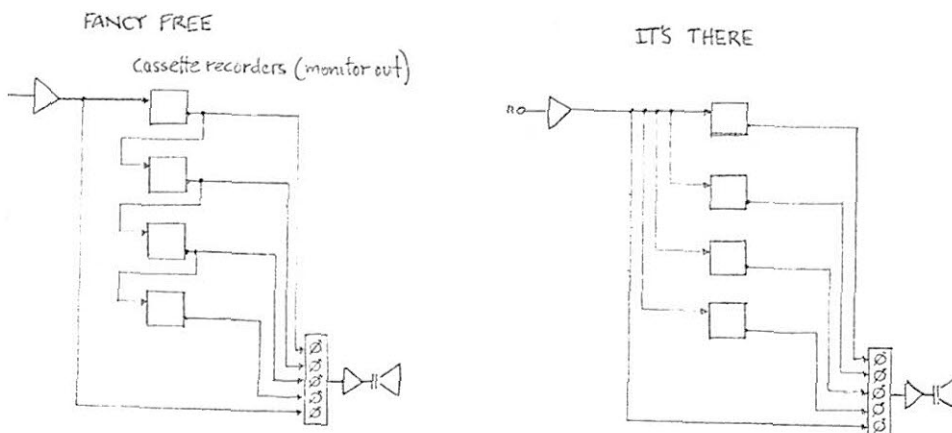
IT'S THERE

Each cassette operator is to predict (privately) which of the set of alternative versions of the text the speaker will read. These predictions may change continually, in the same way that a new choice of alternatives is open to the reader for each reading of the text.

Thus, the first kind of imperfection would be the difference between what you have predicted and what is read. The other kind of imperfection would be the interruption of the reading of the text by a playback sound.

It should be noted, perhaps, that the effect of the imperfection is different for the two texts. In FANCY FREE the fact of the imperfection is the same for all operators, and the effect is cumulative and begins with the machine nearest to the speaker.

In IT'S THERE each operator may have chosen (predicted) a different set of alternative lines. Thus, while the effect is still an accumulation of playbacks, it can originate at any of the machines.





TEXTS:

FANCY FREE

line 1 I AM FANCY FREE  
line 2 UNDER A STARRY SKY  
line 3 GREY GREYER THAN A MOTHER'S CUNT  
line 4 AND BITTERER

IT'S THERE

line 1 (RECENTLY I'VE FOUND IT)  
(MORE FREQUENTLY NOW I'VE FOUND IT)  
(JUST AFTER WAKING I'VE FOUND IT)  
line 2 IT'S THERE  
line 3 (A HUGE EMPTY ROOM)  
(A HUGE, HUGE EMPTY ROOM)  
line 4 (SOMEHOW I IMAGINED THERE WOULD BE A PARTY GOING ON)  
(I DON'T KNOW WHY, BUT I IMAGINED THERE WOULD  
BE A PARTY GOING ON)