

Alvin Lucier

So, ah I've read about in *SOURCE* your piece *GENTLE FIRE*. You are interested in instrumental sounds and you relate technology or electronic media to the environment. So I 'm just curious how how um um how you work.

WELL, you know, every composer needs some kind of a system with which to operate. You know, either you have a tonal system or a chance system or you have a serial system, you know. And not that you THINK in terms of the system, but just something you know to go on. And um I've found that I like to study environmental systems.... and that's the wrong word.... systems that occur in the natural world, right? And I don't tape record them. I don't get, go to gather the particular sounds. In other words it doesn't interest me to take a taping machine and tape record the sounds of birds or bats. But what I do enjoy is to study the means by which these animals or the natural worlds use ah particular sounds with which to survive, ha! Okay?

And then I I interpret those and devise a way to get performers into the situation. For instance, my echo piece. Do you know that piece, the echo?

I am sitting in ah....

No, that piece is spelled V-e-s-p-e-r-s.

Vespers, ya.

Yeah, that's a perfect example. I mean that's used in bats, that's using the sound sending and receiving apparatus of bats. And so many people ssaaid, "Oh, that's wonderful! Why don't you tape record the sound of bats?" Well, of course it's too far above what the ear can hear. But you could be able to slow it down. But that doesn't interest me at all, the sound of the bats. What interests me is the way bats operate.

Ah ha, the structuring of communic..., of communication.

Right, the cccommunication ability. And um it interests me to find out about that because they do it very beautifully. They are experts at that, far beyond us. And I think it's to our interest to learn that. ha.

So what did you use again in VESPERS to produce that?

I used a specially designed audio generator called a sondol, s-o-n-d-o-l, which is a device which sends out a pulse, which in a crude way imitates the way a bat ah...

Yeah.

But in imitating the natural, ah the way that the natural world works, you find out about it, and you also connect to it in a beautiful way. You don't exploit it. I would feel that tape recording dolphins or bats or something as somehow exploiting ha their art. I would rather do what they do, on the level that we're able to, you see? That's the difference.

So so this this kind of, when I remember, VESPERS is a kind of fast interchange or echoing from left to right.

It's all about echos. It's ah employing echoes to bounce off objects in the environment, to tell you how far away you are from those

objects, and to tell you what the quality of those objects are by the echo. And it puts a player or a number of players in a very like different kind of a musical situation, because they have to hear the physical qualities of the sound, not any emotional or anything that suggests anything else to the players. It's the physical quality.

The distance, or?

The distance, timbre, created by the echoing effect from an object, right? Now, whatever the audience finds, whatever suggestive poetic qualities that the audience finds, that's another question.

Did you have other pieces like VESPERS where you were concerned with communication systems of nature?

Yes. I just did a piece now that uses ah the same kind of thing you hear in *I'M SITTING IN A ROOM*, that you create ah standing waves by tuning oscillators, pure sounds, in a space. And you can create standing waves which I can predict where they're going to be. And I can design them, right? So that you're able to walk in a space and perceive loud and quiet spots in the space.... a sound geography. I would be able to bring a blind person into a space and be able to guide him across it by tuning the oscillators to make the valleys, okay?

And I can make that more interesting than that. I mean, I can set up more loudspeakers and change the frequencies, so that those standing waves can spin. I do this piece where they spin. Now, they don't go from a loudspeaker to another loudspeaker. It isn't a scanning. It's not an amplitude scanning. It's untuning the oscillators, so that the lines at which the standing waves occur are always moving.

Like phase shifting.

Yes, yeah. So that is kind of this same thing, only....

it's orientation in the space you are in.

Right. And it's not exactly communicated. I mean, it's not one player communicating with another, but it's the player communicating with the acoustics. And also if you had like a dancer and you had another dancer, if one was to move, one could disturb the stability of the standing waves. So that the other one would be able to feel that..... in a very kind a delicate.... It's a very delicate piece.

It ah strengthens or sensitives the awareness of a human being moving in an environment.

Yeah, it's like amplifying it. It's like standing in a pool of water, and if you move a little bit, you create the ah....

Yeah.

I'm doing a NEW piece, which I haven't even done yet, which I haven't really played yet. And I'm going to play it up in Albany when I go. Which has to do with defr...when sound defracts around an object. Ha! You see, I'm interested in very simple things. That's a very simple thing. But composers haven't been able to, so far I think, been able to employ that. It's very hard for somebody to hear that. It's a small phenomenon. But I've found by choosing pure

sounds of certain particular frequencies, the length of which, the wave lengths of the you know frequency, I've found ways to find optimum frequencies to diffract around objects. If you have another person in front of the loud.... in front of the sound, I am able to measure the body of that person, heh heh ha

And this defines the spectrum?

This defines what particular fff, yeah, what the sounds would be.

How do you do it technically?

I use pure oscillator sounds. And I am able to measure the particular width of the object. And then I choose a frequency, the length of which, the wave length of which will diffract around it. For example, you have a head that has so many inches across. If I play like a low note, the wave length of that sound is too big to make any particular difference. It just goes right around, The fact that you're standing there doesn't have anything, doesn't disturb that.

However, if I choose a pitch the wave length of which is about a half as big as the width of your particular head, then the wave length bounces around your head. And that's audible.

So, I'm making a piece where I use like a single particular object. I don't know exactly how the piece is gonna work yet, but I'm gonna use an object that stays there, that stays particularly still. Okay?

hm hm

I have sound behind it. I take a microphone and scan up and down in the front. I have to move it. So, the microphone picks up the diffraction of sound as it bounces around from the object. If I have an object that doesn't stay there still, if I have somebody that's able to move in front of a sound, I need a single mike. So that when the object passes, you see, as the sound goes around, the microphone is able to pick it up.

So my problem is to stage that in a very lovely way, and to make it so that the audience hears that. That's all it is, that's all it is.

What's the title, of the piece?

Well, I think ah, I'm just in the midst of composing it. And It's gonna be called O-U-T-L-I-N-E-S.

OUTLINES, ya. I know another piece, I AM SITTING IN A ROOM, where I really like this kind of changing, ah the recognition of the speech towards the recognition of the environment you're in. So it seems to be like a ah red thread going through your pieces, this being very interested in the environment and the situation of the person in it.

In speech though, you know I'm interested in speech, and I've done a couple of pieces that use speech. Because I do have a problem with my speech, and I'M SITTING IN A ROOM is as much a piece about speech in a way as it is about environment. And I'm interested in going along, going on with that. And I'm thinking of doing some poetic pieces where I would talk. You see, when you have a speech problem like I do, and you're going to stutter....

You know that word?.... you're going to stutter, on say an "S" or an "L" or a particular sound, one thing you do is substitute. And you change to another word.

Ya, I've I've, ah just seen that, ya.

And that's in, that's fun. I mean that's, when you do that, the other word that you don't find has to be ah, what word you choose to substitute has to be a very interesting connection. Because it has to be the same kind of word. It has to mean the same.

A kind of synonym.

Yeah, synonym. But when you stutter, you scan the language. You're scanning your past. Because why you stutter on a word must be a reason, the anxiousness, the anxiety of that, ah I don't understand. And it must have to do with the sound. And that sound must have to do with an association. I don't understand it. So when you stutter on a word when you're very small, there's probably a reason. There's an anxiousness that you have. Then when you really become a stutterer, the anxiousness gets ah generalized, ha ha.

So when you change from a word to another, it's as if you're scanning the language for all the associations that you've ever had. So I'm trying to make a poetry that would be a kind of oral poetry, where I would speak, and the choice of the words that I would make would have something to do with that. Sort of an etymological test.

Which experiences did you have performing I'M SITTING IN A ROOM ?

Well, I never performed that much. We've done a lot of files. Now did BOB ASHLEY.... because you've been talking about BOB, and BOB and I are very close in our ideas, and we're good friends.... When he lived in Ann Arbor, the ONCE GROUP made a series of films, and I was, I was in the films. ha haah.... And the idea was that I would talk in these films. I would just improvise, and just talk.

This was an experience that got me interested in all of this. Because before that I didn't want anyone to know that I had this speech impediment. I wanted to hide it. It's not fun to, you know, it's like having a leg that doesn't want to work. You don't want people, you know, to talk about it.

And when we did these films, it opened me up to the possibility that there was a performance kind of thing. I had kind of a SKILL haha! in speech that other people do not have.

And you just used that.

I used that just in a very open ah....

The sounds coming out through the playback and the playback of the playback and so on, until melodies ate formed through the overtones.

Well, my other pieces are sort of like that. They are very small, they pay attention to very small things. Although I'm not sure SITTING IN A ROOM does. So, GENTLE FIRE is now just a conception you say?

I want to do that piece, but I never have had the time. ha.

But you wouldn't have done it with a recording of the natural sounds?

Yes, I would have. Yes, I would have. That is one piece that I would have.

What would have been the process of, changing into another sonic quality....like ah rusting leaves into roaring rivers?

Well, that piece GENTLE FIRE was supposed to be made for two performers who were good at synthesizers. You know, in America here we have all these portable synthesizers, the Moog, the Arp, um you know. And I've never been very interested in employing them. I've never liked what synthesizers do.

Ya, they are not very adaptable.

Yeah, I don't like them. But ah I thought if through one of these wonderful players, who can do anything with the synthesizer....

Oh, the other thing was I don't like the particular sounds that come out of the synthesizer. But I do like when you put some other sound INTO a synthesizer. If you are able to process some other sound....Because a filter is a filter. And it doesn't matter whether it's in the synthesizer or not. So I wanted to make a piece where performers who can really play synthesizers would have a gigantic task.... to take an original sound from the street or from the natural world, and then by putting it through parts of the synthesizers, like the filters, voltage control, amplifiers, could process them to sound like other sounds. I could imagine somebody doing that.

It involves the listener very much in recognition of qualities, and where the limit is. The idea sounds very exciting.

What I would need is a very good.... I need several people who really want to do that.

You were the editor of the SOURCE, Number 10. There I see some other conceptions, like the Que.... The Duke of York or the Queen of the South. Could you just explain the Idea?

Well, the DUKE OF YORK was rather similar to the GENTLE FIRE, in the sense that I was thinking of oh Lord, I was thinking of making a composite identity out of partial identities. haha! That's hard to explain. um, I was thinking that in a person's mind the identity the person

might have is like an ideal, a composite of a lot of different human beings that he or she thinks about. And I was thinking that with electronics you could make a piece where two or more players could connect with one another by one player making a series of utteren.... or particular sounds, and the other player trying to make them sound like other people, to build up a composite. It's very ah hard to explain.

Once you decided to make a change....Say, I say something. You alter that in the electronics, and you make it sound like something else, like some quality of a voice that you know from another person. Then I say something else. You make a change on that change, but you have to keep that original one. So you keep building up personality upon personality.

Like the composites of one sound.

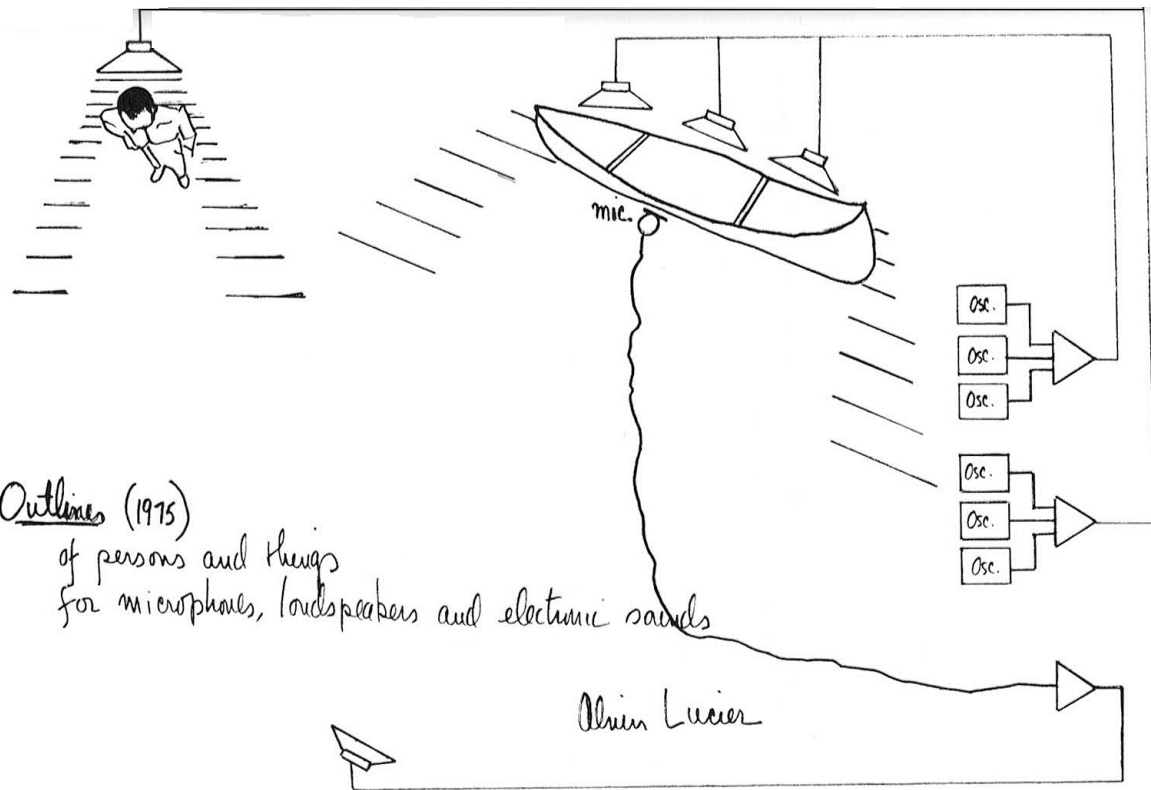
Right. You know the police department when they draw like a criminal. They don't know who the criminal is. In America anyway« I'm sure they have it in Germany. They have a series of the particular chins. And they'll say to you, "Is it this kind of chin?" And you'll say, "No, that's not what he looked like." You finally, you say, "That chin maybe." "Okay, how about the mouth? Is this the mouth?" "No." Finally you build up a face from all the possible. This does happen in terms of speech. And it's very complicated, the connection that the players have with one another.

Ya, ya. So, what do you think basically that the electronic media could help generally to relate, the person to environments, to make him more aware, more sensitive?

Well, we have to do that. Because most of our speech is through the media anyway. I mean the phone calls, where you're talking to one another over the phone all the time. You're tape recording my voice. I mean so often you connect with me in a media way. You have a tape recorder. You have a camera. We've talked on the phone. So it's part of us. There's no way of getting around that. And as an artist I find it interesting material.

I mean, what distinguishes you from some others is just that you use it very much in a personal way I would say.

Yes, exactly. Oh yes, ya. Well, I think that's ah good art. hahaha hahaha



Outline (1975)
of persons and things
for microphones, loudspeakers and electronic sounds

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