Sonic Genealogies

Judith Hamann on Alvin Lucier

My name's Judith Hamann, I'm a performer composer from Narrm, Melbourne, in so-called Australia, currently based in Berlin. My work is mostly oriented around process-based performance practices, which focus a lot on teleperformance, as well as field recordings, more conceptual research, and mostly linked in some sense with physical phenomena in a relational practice, whether that's in terms of vibration or recording as a performative surface, tuning systems and harmonic space, as well as more speculative sound surfaces. In this podcast I'm going to be talking about the featured artist Alvin Lucier and a little bit about how his thinking, composition, legacy and spirit connects to my own practice.

Alvin Lucier was an American composer who died on the first day of December last year at 90 years of age. His work explores in many enfolded, but also perhaps maybe unfolded ways the physicality of sound and phenomena. He's most known more widely perhaps for his explorations and uncoverings of rooms, spaces and objects ranging from the domestic to the enormous, for working with brain waves, physics, phenomena, like "dyning", acoustical beating, even sending his heartbeat to the moon and back, making that satellite some kind of possible resonator for his own pulse and for human kinds of electricity.

I, actually, first met Alvin Lucier at his 80t birthday party at Charles Curtis' house in San Diego. That was sort of a bizarre, otherworldly thing for me. It was only my second time traveling overseas at all and to even get to be there was wild. Charles would a while on the track become my doctoral supervisor at UC San Diego and it is really through my relationship with Charles that I was lucky enough to work with Alvin as much as I did. I am really so grateful for being able to spend some time with him in the past few years and to get to experience so many performances both by Alvin himself and of his work by the broader community around him.

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Reflecting on Alvin's form of thinking or compositional philosophy and the question of what kind of relationship Alvin's work has to sound… Certain language from James Tenney's Forward to Chambers, which is a book about Alvin, came up where he describes Alvin's work as dealing with manifestations and revelations letting, and I quote, "inarticulate nature speak". I do find this phrasing around Alvin's work compelling in some ways because there is definitely a sense of the revelatory, the sense of illumination or lifting a veil, of making compositional settings that allow a certain phenomena or activity to "speak" (in quotation marks) or perhaps rather to sound. But also, I suspect that in Alvin Lucier's work there's more entwining, more labor perhaps isn't the right word, but something of the sort of entanglement of human nature, something more grounded. There's an openness. It's not a magician pulling back a curtain, it's not like the wizard of Oz, you know? It's something more like a holding of space and making spaces physically and temporarily where we might be out of shift modalities but might be able to move into other ways of hearing and feeling the world.

In the way I think about Alvin's work, and this is also a major component of my own process, it's more about setting a kind of proposition or frame which puts things in motion, into activity. And the score as a sort of proposition is not necessarily where the piece is really located, the piece is elsewhere, it's in the navigation of and tending to phenomena. It is in the following of the sound and in all the artifacts created by undertaking that activity. For instance, in the cello quartet One Arm Bandits, which I recorded at Alvin's Connecticut house in November 2019, which was also the last time I saw him, all four cellos are bowing the same open string for each movement, Sol, A, D, etc., with differences in bow pressure and speed, resounding in fluctuations in pitch, which in turn create acoustical beating and differences in depth of field as you listen. So here… The activity itself here is very simple and the notation or work object of the score is really just a frame for that activity, however, precise in terms of marking out speed and bow pressure, the phenomena that are the real focus of the piece aren't marked out, if that makes sense. And there is something important for me in this approach of undertaking a certain kind of action, or activity, that sets all these other materials, phenomena, artifacts, unexpected things in motion, that one can then follow as you navigate them in performance, and for me this is one of the most important lessons of Alvin's work.

I have an ongoing practice which draws on a lot of research and material working with broader ideas about shaking. So I take the shaking rate, or the rate of tremor from…the sort of shaking rhythm of the instrument itself by a bow and the end pin fully extended. And I think of this as a kind of act of sphygmology, or pulse taking, one where the cello then instructs my own physicality, communicates how it wants to move, in a sense. By working in this way and then transferring the tremor to my left hand, which is the one that subs the strings, this creates a frame of motion which is in some sense endemic to the cello. And it allows a kind of unfolding where the cello finds certain partials and resonances or tremors and textures, that sometimes surprise me, actually. And it's all emerging out of a sense of resonance with a particular space or another instrument. And it's my task then in the activity of performing to be a sort of shepherd, to follow the sounds themselves where the cello leads me to let phenomena and frequency emerge and disappear and transform.

I also have this practice which is focused on cello and humming. So, this is something that I started doing sort of intuitively, but which I now realize speaks pretty deeply to the

impact of Alvin's work, as well as my work with Charles Curtis, on hearing differently. So, this interested me initially because I realized that by humming very softly into a bowed cello pitch you can get all the phenomena, the beating to really come alive, with the actual material of the thing, which is setting that beating in motion is sort of hidden or buried in the cello sound. So, then it becomes really about the phenomena, it's placing the focus really there. For me this was a way to play which sort of exemplifies the real shift that is taking place over many years in terms of what happens in the air, much more so than to things in discrete individual sound sources. I think of a lot of what I do in performance as having some relationship to shepherding or tending. I think working in sound this way is sort of a strand of a practice of care. To me it is something that is ministrative as well as instrumental, if that makes sense.

So working in the way that Alvin's compositions ask us to has taught me a lot about this, in terms of taking care not only of sound, but that surface of relation that is created by playing a frequency, say, at a certain proximity to a pure wave oscillator. To place our attention on what is created by two or more actions in composite, that create a living, shimmering phenomena that is held in a shared space only by this meeting, by this shared motion. Alvin's work is so much about that space. It's not about frequencies, or notes or instruments as points, as independent subjects, but about the relationship between them. So much of his work inhabits a space of in-betweenness for me. I sometimes talk about this as a form of collective hallucination that we might sustain in relationship to another musician, a space, a pure wave oscillator, etc. But I feel less and less these days like it's even that ephemeral, or rather that there is a real materiality in the ephemeral. And I'm really stretching something from a crazy utopia here into my own little thinking universe, but that the ephemeral is a kind of material.

You know, so I guess I'm trying to get more comfy with the performer-composer thing these days. Sometimes, I have some trouble seeing myself in that role as it is so often defined. Maybe the way Alvin inhabits that space is a little bit closer to how I see myself than your kind of composer with a capital "C" sorts of folks might see themselves. But really, I see myself very much as a performer who builds relationships with sounds. And the same kind of shepherding I do in performance, in my composition sort of world, it's just in a different frame and on a different time-space scale, but it's still the same kind of practice. I just sort of just follow the sounds and very, very slowly, carve out the space of the piece. For me the practice of it is the same. I'm just responding. I'm not like a "concept-execution-result" sort of person, I'm much more interested in the sticky space between things and what happens there, what debris of artifacts or unnotable things happen there. What does it feel like? Where does it want to go? The cello tells me a lot, and my body and the voice that is part of the instrument that is my body tells me a lot. And the space I am in, and rhythms, and feelings, and temperature, and environment, the other bodies and beings around me there, are all folded in, in some way.

And I don't actually think these practices of composition and performance actually separate things from me, which sometimes feels weird because there's this disconnect in perception of that from outside. I guess that's because maybe aesthetically or materially different things that I do live in different kinds of listening spaces, right? But to me they are all part of the same thing. I'm asking similar questions, they are all talking to each other, the cello, playing notated music made by other people, making recordings, writing, making these sound surfaces, it's not separate. I think that a multi-modal, multi-dimensional sort of way of going about things, as a way of being, is also a

little bit Alvin Lucier. He was that sort of personality, where he was a lot of "ands", "ands" rather than "ors". Football fan, experimental composer, so particular, and deep and meticulous and then simultaneously sometimes very party, and fuck it, and funny, and playful and uncertain, and also so certain and so, I think, there's somehow here an active resistance to binary thinking, or oppositional thinking actually, at play. We can be material and immaterial at the same time, right? Science and poetry can be great friends. Sciences, not necessarily mechanistic, can be very poetic, and poetry can show us so much about the realities we inhabit.

So I think the idea that these things are fixed and then someone's music dissolves them… I think it's not a dissolving, but actually, a sort of refusal instead, right? I think Alvin, along with so many composers and thinkers and musicians that I admire, models that kind of refusal. And by refusal I think what I mean to say is like a committed engagement, a commitment to the stickiest spaces that are difficult to silo, where it's difficult to mark out a role, or ownership, or authorship, or property, or correctness, or outcome, or the sense that things are finished or fixed.

So, in the background we are listening to a piece called *Music on a long thin wire*, which is a piece by Alvin Lucier that he started working on in 1977. And this piece takes the idea of the Pythagorean monochord, one string instrument as a launching point for creating an instrument that is sort of deceptive in its simplicity, but at the same time offers up a great deal of complexity and richness. It's somewhere between an installation and a sort of a live, resonating performance for the instrument in relation to the room, interference, and resonance. And this piece speaks to a lot of themes that seem to have come up so far in terms of sound as subject and agent, in terms of the compositional frame or setting, in terms of activity and aliveness.

What we are hearing is a long piano wire stretched across a room with the ends of the wires connected to a loudspeaker terminal, and then a sound wave oscillator is then sort of driving the wire while a magnet also straddles the wire. And the interaction that occurs is then sort of an exploration of the flux field of the magnet in relation to the frequency and volume of the oscillator, which causes these visible, and then, via contact mics, audible vibrations. One of the things I was thinking about when I chose this piece for the background is something Alvin said in the Line and Arts to the release of this record on Lovely Music, where he talks about how deliberately putting specific active pre-composed, or even improvised material through the wire, never activated in ways that he found interesting. And that it is when the instrument is like carefully tuned and then left to just be in a space, then it becomes this responsive, active, sounding. And it's in dialogue with air currents, and temperature, and air conditioning, and footsteps of visitors to the space. And they all shift, and resonate, and generate sometimes surprising material. In those notes, Alvin also talks about how during its installation in Japan, professor Shin Nakagawa, from Osaka City University, reportedly slept under the wire, and then told Alvin that even without even any movement in the space, the wire would sometimes suddenly erupt into complex harmony, like seemingly of its own agency.

The relationship to, or contrast with, John Cage was also raised in terms of asking questions about the phrase "letting sounds be themselves", and how that might be different in Alvin Lucier's work to John Cage's. So, I am not sure that I necessarily agree that Alvin's work is post-Cagean, although obviously, like, Cage's cracking open of certain spaces, in terms of work composition is, and can be, of course, so important

and it that sense it could be argued that a lot of United States, European-heritage music experimentalism can, in one way or another, be traced to Cage. But I guess I am always wary of the tendency to claim or posit lineage or inheritance in how we construct canon, or history generally. As I feel like, these sorts of frames often call upon colonial senses of proximity and even ownership. For me, the only comment I feel I can really make here is more personal, if that is okay, which is to say that there is a discernible difference in terms of what it might mean to "let sounds be themselves" between these two composer figures. There is a feeling, and I mean it is a feeling rather than any sort of provable nugget of academic wisdom, but my feeling is in some of the more well-known works of Cage that exemplify this segment, like 4'33 etc., letting sounds be themselves is somehow an active compositional framing, but at the same time a kind of passive listening space for those sounds. Whereas, I think in Alvin's work, letting the sounds be themselves is more responsive, there's a relationship here between the sound subjectivity, its activity, its movement, its inclination, its desires… The composer performing then is very much complicit, and is part of what happens, in what, in fact, sounds. In Alvin Lucier's work there are bodies involved, responsiveness, resonance, relationships. And in the same sense that we can observe something without affecting it, in that sense when performing Alvin's work, one must give this kind of fullness of attention and presence to the sounds.

The other thing that comes up is the sort of curiosity, the sense of play in Alvin Lucier's work. And, I think, when musicians and artists work in spaces that overlap with more clearly delineated fields of science, like with physics in this case, and that kind of thing, it often implies a particular kind of studious seriousness. And that's part of, maybe, of course, the longer arch in the history of siloed knowledges and how that plays out in the history of mechanistic perspectives in science, but it gives a sense of studiousness or maybe even rigidity. And I think it is important to know how much curiosity and wonder, and play forms part of Alvin's process and experimentation, in the sense of that word, where you, like, set up an experiment and see what happens, and maybe it doesn't work, or maybe it doesn't work in the way you expect it to, but in trying and then seeing what that frame of experimentation gives to you, that's an incredibly valuable position in making work. And I think Alvin leaned into that uncertainty his whole life. Even when I first properly worked with him, he was I think 84, maybe 83, and was still asking questions like: Does it work? What are we hearing? What's happening? Is this interesting? At the same time as bringing this kind of grounding, this certainty as well, like a real clarity in details like how bowchangers should sound and a sense of frame, and how much time it might take to find the listening space to hear what he's looking for. And I think this combination, again the "andness", of bringing play, and fun, and curiosity into his space of meticulousness and focus, that's very special. And I think it's important not to lose sight of that multiplicity in creating, and not to lose the sense of wonder and joy in what we are doing.

Alvin Lucier's work has of course impacted in so many ways anyone who works with sound in space, with experimentation in putting sonic phenomena into performance practices. And his influence is, I think, simultaneously very visible, in so many peoples' work through clear, or more obvious, links and processes. But then I also think there are all these more subtle ways that he is present in terms of play, for instance. I think his way of thinking about sound and experimentation is now inextricably woven into the fabric of how we experience sound across multiple fields. I'm not sure that I would make in the way I make without Alvin having existed, without his particular resonance. Really, just to

be invited to speak about Alvin Lucier on this podcast in relation to my work... There are so many incredible artists connected to Alvin… It's just really an honor that you hear something of what I do, that's a reflection of what Lucier gave to us as listeners, and as people. I think Alvin's work, over and over again, offers the opportunity to experience the world differently, and that's an incredible gift. For anyone who might just be discovering Alvin Lucier's work I encourage you to go into it with open ears and heart, and enjoy this very special world of sound and space.

Alvin Lucier. Bob Antaramian