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Performed installations

Richard Glover

This chapter follows on from the previous one, but does not restate its discussions of perception. I will further explore the issues of experiencing immersive environments within performed installations. These are taken to mean extended performances in which there is no division between performance space and listening space, in which performers are scattered throughout the installation space, and audience members (and occasionally performers) are able to move around and within, and may enter or exit at any time. I am discussing the experience of a fixed object that the listener understands clearly as simply having started, or been set in motion, at some point, as there is no formal development or transformation operating within the construction of the work.

The chapter derives very much from my own experiences of immersive sound installations, described in my own terms. I do not attempt to account comprehensively for the many different installation environments that operate over extended durations; rather, I am interested in exploring a single scenario in heightened detail. Similarly, the philosophy behind sound arts installation is not tackled here – this has been dealt with thoroughly elsewhere.¹ I discuss *performed* installations specifically because the concepts of the work (both the harmonic/timbral intent and the indeterminate fluctuations arising from performative issues) are realised through human agency, rather than through software performing pre-determined algorithms. In this way, I am able to involve discussion of the acts of performance, and the impact they have upon the listening experience.

1. See Voeglin, S. (2010) *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art*. London: Continuum.

The listening environment in which individuals are able to traverse the space in order to experience different listening locations promotes the notion of individuals taking charge of their own narrative throughout the duration of their stay. The very fact that listeners may enter and exit freely is a clear indication of this, and the varied locations of each audience member throughout the space, chosen according to their own set of subjective preferences, instils the notion of responsibility and performative listening. This occurs more strongly than in a concert environment (which need not necessarily entail a concert hall) in which people remain in a fixed position, and the intention is for all to experience the piece for its entire duration.

Canadian composer Chiyoko Szlavnic defines the level of engagement attainable with the surface of the sound in this work: '[m]y music requires that the listener step forward, come very close in order to see (hear) the details – just as one would in order to look at the details of the pigment on a painting' (2006, 39). Whilst this can clearly apply to the music of the previous chapter, it can be used to serve as a representation of the different acts involved within performed installation experience: a close listening to the details from an active listening mode, and physically moving towards a particular sound source to magnify further the nature of that sound. This ability to 'step forward' provides listeners with an opening to a great deal more complexity in their processing of a situation than when remaining stationary in one location. Alva Noë's perception-as-touch thesis manifests itself in both the physical and metaphysical worlds: audience members can reach out by increasing their proximity to sound sources, whilst they actively reach out with their own perceptual processes. Continuing the haptic framing, by physically reaching out with movement, the listener can determine how 'hard' perception touches auditory material by proximity and active listening, and how 'roughly' the auditory material is handled. The immersive installation experience is akin to archeology, exploring different locations and occasionally finding something that resonates with yourself, and then seeing what can be found around or within it to contextualise, reveal how it

is made, and perceive its finer details. It is an active role, in which continuous discoveries are made through the reaching out of physical movement and from a performative listening.

How might this affect durational experience? Consider James Tenney's *In a Large Open Space* from 1994, in which performers are distributed throughout the installation space and play long tones on a low fundamental and pitches from its harmonic spectra up to five octaves above. Due to the sustained tone material which is to be performed, duration as experienced in *In a Large Open Space* draws upon similar auditory processing as discussed in the previous chapter. However, as explained, the audience movement built into the piece renders this a different *kind* of perceptual environment – hence the need for a separate chapter.

In Tenney's piece, the performed harmonic spectra does not develop or transform into new sections. Pitches from the harmonic series are selected at will by individual performers, so that the global sonority is continuously and indeterminately shifting, and providing an immediate, comprehensible presence of the harmonic series in architectural space. The piece is, in keeping with Tenney's previous work, created as a single gestalt entity, whose inner details are exposed for closer inspection by the audience. Audience members are surrounded by individual performers continually renewing pitches, or switching to new pitches after a previous tone has been performed.

Robert Morris wrote about removing unnecessary internal relationships out of a sculpture so as to shift the focus to the space and to the viewers. His works could almost be seen as demonstration objects, which prompt an awareness in the observer of their perception of the associations between things and situations. In much the same way, Tenney has previously stated that he believed it was the function of art to explore reality through perception (Young, 1978, 4); he wanted his music to prompt a similar awareness in the listener to comprehend the magnitude of their listening capabilities, and the manner in which these can develop.

There is a continuity within the experience of *In a Large Open Space*, somewhat different to that of Young's *Composition 1960 #7*, that arises from the constant sense of renewal of the soundworld. Tenney built in the instruction for the 12 or more performers of the work to avoid playing a partial that is already sounding, which gives the experience of the work a continuous movement; if instruments with diverse registral ranges are selected for the performance, then a good representation – if not the entirety – of the first 32 partials of the harmonic spectrum, as described by Tenney in the piece's instructions, will be sounded throughout the duration of the work. Tenney's instruction ensures that the performance will not sporadically narrow in upon only a few partials, which would suggest to the listener a hierarchical pitch structure at that moment. I am reminded of Chapter 7 of Cornelius Cardew's *The Great Learning*, which has singers choose new pitches independently – rather than choosing a note already being sung – if the only audible pitch is the one a singer has just sung. This ensures continuous transformation, rather than a narrowing in on one or two pitch centres.

We are in an age now where terms such as performers, hardware designers, coders and composers all slide into similar meanings. The listener becomes a part of that medley, as they create, perform, perceive, interpret, understand, question, re-create and so on.² Immersive sound environments like those under discussion provide platforms for individuals to expand and develop their perceptual capabilities, and thus fuel a curiosity and want for exploration. Pauline Oliveros is someone who states that her performing and composing come from her listening (Barry, 2013); her listening is the central driving impetus behind how she makes music.

In performed installations, the audience are not simply experiencing the space in relation to the sound sources; they are experiencing the space

2 Indeed, in a performed installation such as this, the performers are very much listeners as much as the non-performers; however, to explore discussions of physical movement throughout the installation space, I will make a distinction between those listeners who perform in a fixed location throughout, and those who are able to move across the space freely.

in relation to the *performances* of those sound sources. Audience members engage with relationships between different performers, their sound sources and their placement within the lattice of all the sound sources. Michael Pisaro has written about the nature of the ‘tangible presence of the performer when not playing ... whose singular presence is more important than anything written on the page’ (2009). He is describing the solo instrumental situation, but I would extend it to include the performers sounding partials within the context of *In a Large Open Space*, in which the listener can choose to share a close, private, location with any performer, whose presence is magnified upon proximity.

The main aspect motivating each audience member in this format is the ability, and encouragement, to move around the space, upon their own terms. The reaching out towards auditory stimuli is then controllable via each audience member. Duration as experienced is related to the kinds of information received, which is controlled by physical movement. Movement decrees positionality to specific sound sources (termed ‘instruments’, whether they be mechanical, electronic, acoustic or other), clock durations at each position, and directionality of auditory perceptive apparatus (ears and head, and to a large degree, the body). The audience member performs their own interpretation of the installation, through movement – almost choreography – in response to their own perceptions reaching out towards the auditory material.

So, whilst we can perceive these sustained tone environments by processing the multi-layered detailed textures and associating the indeterminate nature of instrumental performance with resultant fluctuations, the movement allows a subsidiary layer of perceptual engagement, making possible a physical ‘reaching out’. The listener then has a cause to move around, to reach out to further auditory textures.

Robert Morris explored how the viewer themselves can continually change the shape of an object by changing their own position relative to the work (1966, 234), and here it is clear how the sonorities of *In a Large Open Space*

also change as the listener moves about the space, assessing transformations in density, spectral cohesion, dynamic consistency and other parameters. However, to further this idea in recognition of the performed nature of the installation, the work can be compared to the experience of a living sculpture, where one registers that perception of the sculpture will change not only if one changes location, but also that the sculpture will continually reorder itself of its own accord, and one's perception of one's location in relation to the sculpture will change with it.

My paths to different locations whilst experiencing *In a Large Open Space* clearly give me a significantly different temporal experience than if I had remained stationary during listening. Sometimes I settle in a location for a duration, before moving elsewhere and doing the same; this means that I will likely experience the *movement* between locations in a concentrated manner, and place more focus upon my active listening in each stationary location. I compare different locations, comprehending the surface activity of the sound in relation to the location of the players around me, their sound sources, and the acoustics of the room. This results in my experience overall being discontinuous, broken up into discrete sections at different listening locations in which I settle to perform active listening.

This is a different experience than if I decide to move continuously throughout an installation for an extended period of time, without an intent to arrive at a particular location – such that my movement is for itself, without a goal. Here, my concentration focuses more on my own interactions with the different locations of the performers within the space, and I listen to how my own movement directs my experience. I develop a much greater awareness of managing my experience: I learn how my distance from performers, or architectural features of the space, can affect timbral aspects of the sound, or surface phenomena articulations, or psychoacoustical processes within my perceptual system. As I move, the tempo of my walking becomes the most significant factor in my experience, and my own body takes on a much more compelling role in how I perceive my own location within the surrounding

installation environment. My active listening incorporates my location and movement across the space in a manner that allows anticipation to play a larger role in shaping my experience. These factors heavily determine my awareness of temporality. When in transit, our focus becomes attuned to how our movement affects what we can hear, and how our active listening adapts to new, upcoming listening scenarios. Having reached a settled location, our active listening becomes more attuned to the present, and engages with comparisons with the past.

Likewise, when we settle in a location for an extended duration, we gradually become more aware of a heightened sense of scale, as the perpetual harmonic series extends lengthwise and we do not just consider what we have been experiencing for the duration of our stay already, but we also begin to anticipate the fixed harmonies far into the future. The *breadth* of the installation is made more apparent, as is our role of insignificant observer; the *temporal* field (within which I situate myself) extends outwards in both directions. However, when we move through various localised timbral and pitch fields to different locations, listening with a heightened awareness that informs our physical movements, the opposite seems to happen, and we are able to examine these different auditory fields and how our shifting perspectival view of them alters as we move through the installation space. Instead of the expanding sense of scale when we remain settled, there is a 'closing in' upon the sounds within our transforming auditory horizon, and we comprehend the piece at a confined, magnified level, rather than the extended level. Of course, many peoples' experiences of installations involve both transit across the installation space, and stillness in fixed locations for particular durations. Temporal experience is fluid and transforms as choices of how and where to experience the work are made. As these activities are combined, the listener develops a more detailed understanding of how their choices of actions within this specific sonic environment can constitute their experience.

I also find that the longer I stay in an installation, the more the modes of perception for remaining stationary, and moving, combine. Over what feels like an extended duration, my physical movement across an installation space becomes a repeated performance of movements I made earlier, and I draw upon recall to determine whether the sonic environment has transformed, and whether my own listening has developed, in a manner similar to that described in the previous chapter.

In consideration of our sensory awareness as we move around the installation, I want to bring in Don Ihde's notion of the perceptual auditory field, through which we develop a sense of the spatial periphery of our auditory sense. As I listen and move across the installation space I evolve a strong sense of my auditory perceptual field; it becomes a living field that transforms as I move, and I learn how the space of the installation affects its shape and scope.

Brandon LaBelle encapsulates what certain installation-creators have already suggested by describing the space of the installation 'not as static object, but as live instrument' (2006, 191). Spatiality becomes as an 'audible condition' that makes us aware of the nature of the installation space (2006, 192). The audience plays an active role in the experience of the artwork; responsibility lies with them, as they discover new aspects of the instrument and are free to perform it as they wish. David Farneth, in describing La Monte Young's *Dream House* of sustained sine tones articulating higher primes of a low fundamental, says much the same thing, stating that by tilting his head back and forth and from side to side, he felt as if he were 'playing the room like an instrument' (Farneth 1996). In both these examples, we can interpret 'room' and 'space' as the installation itself; the space is indivisible from the installation itself, not only housing it but also fulfilling the role of guide for the listener. Grimshaw suggests that the form for *Dream House* could be graphically represented as a map of the space, describing which sounds happen where (2011, 140). This is a powerful consideration, as the listener learns to control their own body and physicality to perceive these sounds, and

to parse them against the background of many other phenomena occurring in that same location. Grimshaw talks about the ‘supposedly static music’ as hyperteological, that is, goal-oriented, in that it prompted him to move to certain different locations (2011, 140); the sensation of space-as-instrument prompted him to feel that he must continue to perform in order to continue to experience the installation itself. This account describes an aspect of the immersive installation experience in which one is so prompted to explore the differentiated sonic materials presented throughout the space that physical movement from one location to another becomes not a simple choice of one among many, but instead a tracking of a singular line of enquiry to reveal something new about one’s understanding of the situation. It is the same curiosity as was described in the previous chapter, but one in which the path is pre-determined, described by auditory events generated by human agents. For *In a Large Open Space*, these paths are necessarily different upon each realisation of the work due to differing performers, instruments, techniques and so on; it is directly apparent what generates these audible paths.

In terms of the installation space being perceived as altered through this transition into instrument, Robert Morris wrote that he intended for the large sculptures he created to alter the observer’s perception of the total gallery space by their sheer presence (1966, 233). *In a Large Open Space* seeks to alter the space not just of the harmonic pitch field – such that we perceive a current combination of partials in the light of previous partials played that rest in our short term memories – and not just in the manner of LaBelle’s spatiality as audible condition, but also the ‘space’ of each listener’s temporal horizon. ‘Spatiality’ comes to mean a function of movement and duration, and as I move across the installation space, duration as experienced alters in a manner that wouldn’t occur if I were stationary.

So, in this way, the active, performative listening described in the previous chapter is transformed into an active performance, stimulated by listening. Each audience member becomes a performer (to bring back the choreographer analogy), interpreting the intentions and soundworlds of the situation

through their own physical, perceptual and cognitive actions. It is they who construct a unique experience upon each visit to the same installation, rather than specifically the instrumental performers. As I re-perform my movement and active listening across the installation space, I become more aware of the performers' actions as they play the partials of this harmonic series. I am able to recall experiences from when I traversed a particular path previously, and compare how both different pitches played, and the manner in which they are being played (variations in timbre, dynamics and so on made by the performers). As particular locations within the installation space prompt me to recall memories from earlier experiences, I find that I am better able to focus upon timbres from specific instruments.

Having discussed the nature of perception in relation to our auditory processes and bodily movement, I want to conclude with a consideration of how an audience member might reflect upon the form of *In a Large Open Space*. Upon experience, without the construction of the work known beforehand, after a certain duration it becomes clear that no directed formal transformation over a duration has been given to the actions of the performers, and that they will continue to play pitches from within a limited palette (although that palette may not yet be fully comprehended by the listener). There will be no new material introduced, the nature of the tones being performed will not alter, and the performance will consist of the finite combinations offered by the pitch choices (recalling Jonathan Kramer's vertical music, which 'defines its bounded sound-world early in its performance and stays within the limits it chooses' (1988, 55)).

What terminology, then, could we employ to discuss form in this context? Can a word such as 'form' apply to a piece such as this, with its continuity over duration entirely fixed, without development of any description? Perhaps the form is the harmonic series, in the lineage of Tenney's form-as-content; or perhaps it is the experience of a continually transforming audible image of the same, fixed harmonic series – due to the different durations of tones performed by the various individual instruments. Along with Grimshaw's

proposals of a map-as-form, he describes the conceptually ‘new’ of the *Dream House* to be found not along the horizontal plane of time, but the vertical plane of space (2011, 138): perhaps the manner in which the sound disperses in the space can be a means to describe the form of a work. Or can we talk about ‘form’ in relation to the many listeners within a work such as this? And how to account for the fact that individual listeners remain within the installation for different durations, entering and exiting at different clock times?

Composer Liza Lim states that, over an extended duration, ‘the idea of “form” is perhaps replaced by a complex of different experiences that one has during the event’ (quoted in Saunders 2003, 8), and this shifting of the discussion towards the individual’s involvement in the artwork proves a more relevant approach to exploring the subjective nature of immersive installations such as *In a Large Open Space* by allowing the different roles performed by the listener, through movement across the space of the installation towards specific locations, and the active, performative listening at various differentiated locations, to be the prominent factor informing one’s relation with a performed installation. This renders irrelevant the fixity in construction, the varied experienced durations by different listeners, and lack of a pre-determined endpoint, as it points away from ascribing a formal descriptor to account for all experiences of the same installation piece. The performers, their articulations, these experiences through their choices of pitches, techniques, sonorities, all contribute to the subjective viewpoint. Form as experiences, or form *of* experiences, in which there is no universal form but rather one that cherishes the individual’s own listening performance, ultimately satisfies Tenney’s outlook on his own creative project: sound for the sake of perceptual insight (Young, 1978, 4).