Mark So, interviewed by Jennie Gottschalk
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MS: By the way, I feel like, I don't know, anything we talk about, you should feel free to use. Don't feel like I'm going to be like offended if it looks like I'm just hanging myself out to be hung. I mean, that's fine. You know, I don't care.

JG: I'll send you the transcript before I publish anything, too.

Okay. Because I feel like a lot of those kind of side—

That's where a lot of interesting stuff happens.

Exactly, yeah. Those are the interesting things sometimes. And what I'm really saying is that I kind of over-prepared, and I came up with all these things to say, and now I'm regretting that, and I'm just like— I'm worried about getting certain things out, and realized, well that's kind of silly.

I don't have some sort of purist streak about what goes in and what comes out. If you want to change things after the fact, I'm totally fine with it.

Yeah, so if there's a paragraph on something or nothing, then later on I'll email you that if I find that I didn't manage to say it.

That's totally fine. And even after I post it.

So you're just posting these things on Sound Expanse.

Yeah. My main motivation with this is, I'm just tired of the sound of my own voice about experimental music.

I know, because you've been in your own head for so long working on this.[1]

Yeah, seriously. And the whole way— It's not just being tired of myself, but just being aware of the limitations of my point of view.

Right, because it's always going to be mediating everything. There's no way around that. It's interesting, because my strategy, when I'm asked to write a piece on a topic, that I know that I'm only one— For instance, The Open Space asked me to write a piece on the wulf.[2] I am not the wulf.

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[1] Jennie's book, *Experimental Music Since 1970.*

[2] A Los Angeles experimental music venue and organization, started in 2008 by Mike Winter and Eric Clark.

Right, you're part of it.

Strangely, I don't like being called part of the wulf. community. All of those words suddenly go into quotation marks when I hear them, and I just bristle, and I feel very, I don't know, like I have a lot of ambivalences and hostilities this way and the other. So inevitably, as I was starting to write, I realized that it was just becoming a repository for my kind of paranoias and my hostilities. So then I just stepped back and realized, well you know what? Why don't I just ask everybody to say their piece. I just sort of framed it as, how do you feel about Harris's death?[3] Did you know Harris? How does that relate or not relate to how the wulf. has unfolded, and what does that mean or not mean to you? And then I just cobbled together kind of a collage of what everyone had written, without attributing anything. I just made this sort of displaced, sort of depersonalized text that was nonetheless just a collage of what everyone had written. With their permission, I did it this way. They didn't think that I was doing interviews and that I was going to weave a narrative. I really, I told them that I was just planning to do this, because it just seemed like the most honest way for me to approach it. And it sort of strikes me that I can do that, but I can only do that on the side. So it's like, I could never publish— Again, it's like the limitations of wanting something more lasting, and something more publicly accessible and available and true, and yet when one finds a more true approach, one finds that that approach is frowned upon, or not liable to be included, or not really welcome. And one ends up having to just be totally marginal about that inscription, and one is left in the same place, really. It's like, oh, here's my attempt at my kind of history, and it ends up being thrown back right into this sort of narrow and lonely and marginal place where I'm standing. And god bless Open Space for wanting to stand there with me, because it's like, I don't know. There's something perfect about that as a publishing venue, anyway. In terms of— It's just this sort of thing, it's totally honest in terms of its standing. It stands maybe in a university library. Like their hope is that some alien is going to maybe come across it in a room a hundred years from now, and open it up and randomly start reading.

Time capsule material. I've been thinking a lot about that sort of thing too, and using the website to be less fixed.

Yeah. Yeah, like maybe there are other strategies that are a little more winning. I don't know. I don't know.

I think so.

But it's always a trick, because there's like a lot of false panacea surrounding the internet, and I don't really believe that it creates more immediacy. It just creates, actually often, it just proliferates mediacy, and creates—invents—entirely new ways, this sort of mediated transmission.

It feels like this double life. It's so strange to me that it's like this one life happens online, and this other life happens everywhere else. And I'm so impressed that you're not at a computer right

[3] The wulf. was named after composer Harris Wulfson.

now, and it's like, why should that be a big thing?

Well, I mean, it's withdrawal, really. Some of us get so tired of it. We just have to remember that there are other, maybe less burdensome—

Other ways of being.

Because there's this sort of hypernovelty of, oh my god, all these other— But they're no less alienated ways of communicating. They're just sort of newer alienated forms of quote-unquote communication and sharing that are just as problematic, and ultimately, just as unsatisfying. And one reaches peak exhaustion all the more rapidly with all this stuff.

And in theory you can become more connected with people, but you can also become far more alienated through misunderstandings and all the things that happen. Anyway, that's just a good chance to thank you for getting in touch with me. I really appreciated it. It's nice to connect this way.

Right, thank you. And thanks for being there at the other end.

Yeah, totally. I don't think these things need to get proliferated at all.

[Some conversation off the record, regarding an internet controversy which inadvertently caused us to get in touch for the present interview.]

Because I could also see how somebody— Some people have this impression of me that I'm underhanded, let's say. I think it comes from the fact that I never fully commit to a full— I always feel like a little bit of a lone wolf. I don't know why. It's just who I am and how I am with others. They could be my closest friends, but I always prefer to be on the edge of something, rather than in the middle of it. And then inevitably, there's a coming to loggerheads, and it allows me to use that distance as a kind of leverage, and I tend to want to express it. So I think some people have the mistaken impression that I want to sabotage things. Like oh, Mark left Facebook years ago, and, now he's put [name redacted] up to this... I could imagine somebody thinking that.

I never heard that, and I never thought that, for what it's worth, and I think I would have.

Oh, okay. I mentioned that to Mike Winter, and he's like, that's a serious concern. Thanks.

Nothing like people feeding your paranoia.

Yeah, that's exactly what I'm talking about. You got it.

No, we're totally cool.

[More off-record conversation.]

There's this feeling of, gosh, I wish we could hold it together after these sort of fleeting, wonderful moments of encounter. And then, oh, we find ourselves on the internet together, but then that devolves so quickly. And you can't blame any of the people for behaving the way that they— There's something comforting about the kind of public shielding, in a way, of the internet. In a way, that's the nice thing about it is that it creates permission, that it allows people to speak things that they might not otherwise be able to bring themselves to say. But on the other hand, it's always already in this context where everyone is primed to be very judgmental about it, and to be attacked by it, and to feel like they're being publicly dragged through, raked over the coals potentially.

Yeah. What might feel like crusading to one person gets perceived as trolling to another.

Exactly. It falls right into that dichotomy. It does. It's the way that Hillary Clinton cannot call Donald Trump out on being a racist without being blamed for devolving the election into accusations of racism. Whatever you think about her or him, it's that weird— There's a public discourse that takes over, and it's just intractable. And the internet definitely promulgates those, even as it creates a lot of permissions for people.

Yeah, it's just more of everything.

Blessing and curse. It's just more of the same, really. Just other ways, experiencing the same conundrum.

Are there early encounters, or the most meaningful encounters you had with experimental music? What drew you into it one way or another?

Yeah, I think encounter is the right word. And I immediately think of several, and I think I'll name three. And they're all kind of around the same time, that'll kind of, I guess show my age or my youth or whatever. But it was sort of around the time I was finishing college in the late 90s. I guess I was on sort of my last legs trying to be a good, studious boy, and act right, and make good and whatnot, and I was a music major at Pomona College, and I guess it would have been the fall semester of my last year. I'd built up some fairly close relationships with various teachers, but I wasn't really satisfied with— Let me just backtrack a second. I didn't begin school with the intention of studying music. It's something that my mother had made me kind of pick up as a child, because she's a professional musician, and I always kind of fought it, and it was just kind of a lever of rebellion. And by the end of college, for whatever reasons, I wanted to explore an aesthetic outlet, I suppose, or direction. I found that that's the way I needed to go, and suddenly my kind of relative facility, let's say, with music became a factor, and I thought, well that's something I should probably reopen and explore in a non-resentful way, and see where that goes. So I kind of went back into it, just as a discipline, and just something I wanted to kind of immerse myself in, and kind of know more about, and perhaps more importantly, sort of reconnect with in a practical way. But I found that it wasn't terribly satisfying to be like singing in choirs, and kind of imitating classical music formal techniques. I mean, it was all interesting, just to sort of be shown stuff and to sort of handle stuff. But I was starting to get to a crisis point, and be reminded of why I never liked taking piano lessons, which was that I didn't see a

satisfying end in sort of going in front of people and playing Brahms or Chopin or Schubert or whatever, especially because in the traditional sense, it wasn't just about presenting the music. It was about a certain idea of the performer channeling that music and memorizing it, and kind of evoking it. And I just didn't have a passion for that. It just gave me a lot of anxiety, and when it came time to play in front of people, I'd always fuck it up in one way or another. So at many levels, it was very unsatisfying. And it always just felt like, mainly, it was something I was always going to be behind the curve on. And it wasn't really doing anything for me, and there was nothing I could contribute to it, and it just wasn't music as I needed it. I felt like I needed music, but this wasn't the way I needed it. And then my piano teacher [Gayle Blankenburg] just decided to throw the *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* [by John Cage] at me. And the great thing about that was that it completely transformed our relationship. It completely transformed the process of learning it, and completely transformed the way that I saw myself as a performer, and so instead of sort of having xeroxed music to take home with me and to take into practice rooms and to pound away at on shitty upright pianos through the night, I was actually given the keys to the piano studio, and I was basically given unfettered 24-hour access to the number two piano in that— In other words, the teacher would teach on the other piano, and this piano would just be mine to work on the *Sonatas and Interludes* with for that entire semester, just carte blanche. And then the idea was, well, somehow at the end of that, to complete the credit requirement, you'll perform some or other of these pieces, and we'll wheel the piano in with your preparations, and that'll be that.[4] And so I got to go in there whenever I wanted to. That was the thing, is I was given the keys to this— I was just sort of given, not like lowly access to the beater pianos, but it was taken seriously, that I could— Let's say, whatever commitment I wanted to bring to it was given full berth, and I was sort of being— I don't know. I guess I should leave it at what I said in the first place. I was given the keys to this thing. And for whatever reason, it just kind of clicked. It's not something I could have worked on, practically speaking, in any of the practice rooms, cause you can't really open those pianos up and prepare them in the same way. You kind of need a grand piano to take the lid off. I would have to sort of clear the table. So it wasn't really about privilege so much as, okay, if you're going to get into these pieces, this is the whole table setting that it requires. And it was kind of great. It was so obvious that it had kind of inflected itself at every level, kind of intervened in the whole pedagogical course of things, like as somebody who was taking piano lessons. It kind of cut through, it created a completely different avenue. And the best part is that when I found myself there, I wasn't at sea. I wasn't bored. I didn't not know what to do. I had everything. It was totally adequate, and I felt adequate to the task in a way that I hadn't before. And yeah, a big part of that is that I felt like it was something that I could do and music that I wasn't miserable at, let's say, or that it didn't make me feel miserable. But I think objectively speaking, probably that I was miserable at is also accurate. Of course people can jump on that and say, wow, you're just excusing your poor musicianship, but I mean, so be it. So be it.

Well eff those people.

[4] Now that I recall, I had to prepare a different piano for the performance, just for logistical reasons, and that obviously made the rehearsal process more engaging for me, as well—not the typical sitting down for a run-through on the foreign recital grand to shake off nerves (or in my case, acquire them).

Yeah, fuck em, but I think it's important to note that— Well, this stuff kind of is abject. You know, what I immediately found was that I was, part of what made me take to the *Sonatas and Interludes* as I did was that I didn't like any of the recordings that existed, because they all sounded to me like they were compensatory at the level of interpretation, that the pianist was attempting to sort of fill in what was deliberately left out that makes those pieces what they are, and kind of steer them towards some other acceptable image, like make it sound like Debussy's gamelan or something.

Right, ham something up.

Or a Chinese zither, or some kind of other rubric. And the whole point was, no, that's been subtracted. Any image has been subtracted.

Don't put it back!

And this is what you're left with. Yeah. And to see that as an opportunity for some other music, rather than something that is in need of, that's an embarrassment and in need of repair, and that that's the challenge. Oh, we're going to tidy Cage up and make him look good. Just you watch. All it takes is a good tailor. And so I felt very liberated by that, and I found that I didn't care that, I wasn't thinking about— All of the concerns surrounding interpretation when you play any classical music is just preoccupied with how phrasing is going to come off for other people. It's a rhetorical tradition that's deeply entrenched.

And a very crowded field.

Yeah, and it's like, well what is a rubato here? Oh, you don't want to keep— You want to keep people in suspense here, and you want to release here. You don't want to give them too much here. You want to save it for— All of that kind of stuff is very oppressive. And then this was something that didn't address any of that, and that to take it seriously meant that all of that had to go out the window anyway, because one had to be singularly and fully committed to what in fact was there. So that was very powerful for me. At the same time, quite randomly— I was also an art history major, because I started out on just a purely humanities track. And I think it was really sort of studying art history that kind of led me back into doing things that were creative. I'd signed up for a seminar in the history of photography at one of the other— The Claremont Colleges is a consortium of colleges, and you can cross-enroll in a lot of the programs. And there was a history of photography seminar being taught at Scripps College, one of the other colleges, and it was being taught by a visiting adjunct professor who was only there for one semester. Her name is Liz Kotz. And it was very interesting for me. I connected with her. It was history of photography. But it turned out that she was working on her dissertation, and she had this crackpot idea that really, 1960s conceptual art, what comes to be known as conceptual art, really emerges from 1950s American experimental music, and Cagean practices in particular. And so she was kind of working on this sort of vast study spanning from Cage's *4'33"* to Warhol's *a: A Novel*. And somehow, because we had sort of clicked in that class, she got the sense that I could help her, because this was a time when no one in music really felt free, let's say, to talk about Cage as music, per se. You would be attacked. You'd couch it in all these other things, and that's

sort of the way it was taught. Well, he's an interesting musical thinker. Not much of a composer. And if you wanted to make him a composer, then you would do the thing with the *Sonatas and Interludes* or you would turn it into something that it's not, or you would point to some earlier crappy percussion ensemble piece that he'd written or something. They're not crappy, but there's some more conservative pieces earlier on, and you'd point to that. But I think she was sort of needing somebody who was willing to kind of think this through seriously, but from the music side, because the art side was fully invested in the suppression of anything that kind of predated the things that became the aesthetic commodities.

And the narrative, people always say now, oh, art's always ahead of music, and musicians are falling so far behind. It's interesting. It's sort of a buzz-phrase or something.

I don't know. I guess I'm not in circles where I have to hear things like that anymore, but it's vaguely familiar. I don't know. It's just so hard to take art criticism as anything but marketing at this point, because it's just such a commercial field. I mean— I don't mean art is a commercial field. I just mean that the field that generates that kind of talk is usually involved in a certain side of the commercial art market. There's just a lot of cross-investment around art. There's a lot of money in art. Put it that way. Music does start to look very hapless indeed in comparison, and it's just very easy to pooh-pooh it, and I think it's really, it's just a class issue, I think, ultimately. It's just a way of looking down the nose at these people who are sort of not functioning, and not having careers. Oh, they're so behind. They need to get with it. Why don't they see what the trends are? They're not following the trend lines.

So I met Liz Kotz, and we continue to be friends. She's one of my best friends. That sounds so high school, "one of my best friends." But yes, she's one of my closest friends. And what she introduced me to was event scores, because she had this kind of particular reading of the event score as not— So here's the problem that she was confronting. Conceptual art absorbs experimental music practices, resulting in these kind of language based practices. But then the frame of reference for those language based practices reverts to modern poetry, rhetoric, these sort of affective frames of reference that suppress what's really going on with language in experimental music, in like a text score, let's say, in *4'33"*. It's not related to Apollinaire. It's not that kind of thing. What it is, it's more closely related to phonography and recording. That was the point that she was making. And so she was basically re-examining these kind of proto-Fluxus event scores of La Monte Young and George Brecht and John Cage, circa 1960, and just really trying to analyze them in what they were picking up on, what they were innovating exactly, and how this gradually turns into sort of what are familiar kind of 1960s conceptual practices. So I became very taken with these scores, because, partly in the process of analyzing them, I became very convinced— I found their realm of possibility really compelling. I suddenly found that these, they struck the same nerve with me as having the *Sonatas and Interludes* introduced to me in the way that they were had done, and so these were sort of sympathetic encounters. So there was no question that this was a rich area of great potential that I felt adequate to, and that there was something for me to do there, and that it addressed what I needed. And then the only remaining question was, well, gosh, where is this now? What happened to this? Did it get eaten by the art market cookie monster? Is it just gone? Did it just disappear? It's so strange that this would be so obscure. And then that's when I had the third encounter. It's the moment where I

kind of came in contact with the sense of the field involving a lot of other musicians and composers that are very much active and around, because it's like, as soon as I asked that question, I found that I instantly was in contact with like 50 people. And that was breathtaking to me. And I think somewhere around there, like within a year, Michael Pisaro happened to present—I didn't know him—he happened to present one of his *mind is moving* pieces for solo guitar in a MicroFest[5] concert at Pomona College. It was after I'd graduated, so it was either in the summer of 2000 or fall, or early 2001. Somewhere around there. And I immediately, I just immediately was like, that's the answer to my question. There was a direct line between everything that I had been working out for myself in terms of the event scores and someone who was in front of me playing their music, someone living, who was a living composer who was continuing this trajectory. It couldn't have been more obvious. It was like lightning. And I don't know if that was the catalyst, or if in the meantime I had started asking around. It was all kind of concomitant, and I was just sort of putting it out into the universe, thanks to the internet, and then very quickly, I encountered people like Mike Richard and Joe Kudirka and Jonathan Marmor, just because they were at CalArts at the time, and they knew Michael. And you know when you first get into these things, you'll ask a very particular question that somehow frames it for you at the time. And for me, it was like, "anybody interested in Morton Feldman?" Something like that.

That's a good place to start.

Yeah, for whatever reason. I guess I had heard a performance of maybe *Crippled Symmetry* or something at LACMA, and it was like, oh, okay, that's sort of later, but that's a dead guy too, and is there anybody around who doesn't just clap for it when it's played, but involved in that? It's like, okay, that's a continuation of this legacy. But it was really, when I heard Michael play *mind is moving*, that that was kind of, just as a listener attending a performance, it was a really kind of catalyzing encounter. And it was a while before I decided to go to CalArts, too, because I didn't really want to do graduate school. I'd kind of decided against, partly because of the kinds of— This is another point I'm coming to, is partly because of the kinds of encounters I'd had, I was realizing what side of things I was on, and that this was not something that probably should be pursued just by following the normal kind of academic trajectory. At least I felt that very strongly. Like I thought, this is not legitimizing work. This is not sort of degree conferring work. This is something that I should just pursue on my own. And what I started to realize was how available that community was, and that that work was— I mean, partly because of how cavalierly my piano teacher had just handed over the keys. It's almost too good to— You know, you unlock this thing. Like literally, it hands you the keys to the kingdom, and then you think, oh my god. But it's like, of course you realize, it only feels that way because it's only a kingdom to you. To anybody else, it's like, what the fuck do I want with this shit? You know, this is just worthless. And so you sort of step back, and you put things into perspective, and all of this, you just start to see everything, the whole lay of things, in terms of this thing that is satisfying your need somehow. I don't know what it was. I did ultimately end up going to CalArts and getting an MFA. But it really had nothing to do with the feeling of getting a credential. It's very strange. It's a legitimate question, like why waste all that money on something that's so totally useless? And I guess my answer to myself and to anyone else is that it wasn't my money. It was the

[5] A microtonal music festival in Los Angeles.

government's money and I'm never going to pay it back. And thanks to Obama, there's something called the income based repayment plan, and according to that payment plan, my monthly payment is zero, and after I've made 20 years of such timely payments, the remaining balance gets forgiven. That's assuming that I hold up my part, hold up my end and continue to be poor, as I am. So it was a great way of just putting myself in a place with all these other people that I had come to know that happened to be there. They were from all over the— I knew it was temporary too, so it was just like, okay, I'd better go sit around this fire while it's burning, because these things come and go. But I was sort of on the tail end, I guess, of maybe like a five year period where just, who for me were a lot of very interesting people at that time were coming through that program, and it was around, very much around Michael Pisaro's having been hired there along with James Tenney. So we're talking about a very short period of time, because they were hired right around the turn of the millennium, and then Jim was dead in 2006. And things are the same but different now, and I'm just grateful for having discovered all of that stuff all at once, at a time when I could also go and immerse myself in it in this slightly structured way, and be around people who only cared about this thing that I needed to be involved in. That was very rambling and incoherent, but at the same time it was three encounters that have a procedural relationship to each other that can be distilled, I hope.

Definitely. It's amazing how it lines up, though. What was the relation between the time you got the Sonatas and Interludes, and that—

That was late 99, I think.

And then the photography class?

That was also late 99, I think same semester, like fall 99.

That's incredible.

Yeah. I mean, it's just great. Like if I hadn't met Liz. She was just there as a temporary adjunct for that semester to teach that class. And I'm just infinitely grateful. She just took me in and gave me the composition lesson of my life just by showing me the things that I never would have been shown. It was just simple as that, just like here, look at this. This is music too. What do you make of this? And just humbly ask you how you think this fits into this whole procedure that I'm trying to think through that no one seems to want to confirm. Well—

Let me think about it.

Yeah! And I was of course just humbled. Like wow, you think that I'm up to answering this question, or address it in any meaningful way.

I think she had good judgement.

I don't know, just her sensing that I could help. I mean, maybe it is just that she had reached the point, you know— It's again, it's that lonely place we're talking about. I mean, it's just so easy to

reach a point of desperation that you're keenly primed to recognize that same sadness in another. I think that's ultimately what it comes down to. It's sort of like conspirators in the night. You know, like in *Barry Lyndon*, where Barry meets the Chevalier de Balibari, and somehow they both know that they're Irish, and they both kind of cry and embrace, and don't say a word of it, proceed to con their way across Europe at cards and games. And that's really what it is. It's the conspiracy theory. That's how it operates. It's like a cancer. You know? We're like a tumescence. We're a cancer on the society. I know I keep dancing around that point, but maybe it comes to your next— Well I don't know, ask your next question.

I think we're getting into it. What's compelling to you about experimental music, or whatever else you'd want to call it?

Yeah. It's great to talk about how it's fascinating and compelling and it draws me, but I think—

If it does something else, you can talk about that too.

Yeah, it's like at a certain level, though, the things that we think were things that we just sort of chose, or that seduced us, I think, for me, as I get further along and I look back, I really start to see that I didn't really have a choice. I didn't really have a choice in the matter, that it's something that had to do with my own kind of terminal nonconformity along one line or another, and a certain set of needs that weren't being met, and just abject necessity, combined with a kind of a survival drive, kind of led me into living a certain way.

That sounds right. That sounds like the narrative.

It really is something that happens to you. So again, I think encounter is the right word. It culminates a whole set of tendencies that are underway, that are unfolding and happening around and through you, and suddenly a machine takes shape, and there's a transfer of energy, and suddenly one is adequate, rather than woefully inadequate. Suddenly one is engaged and actualized, rather than alienated. And it's such a chancy thing. It has to be risked, you know? It has to be risked. I mean it's such a sort of wise old thing to say, because you can look back, and because it happened, it's very comforting— You know, one has a great sense of relief. Then one can say, "well it has to be risked"—there's no guarantee that it will happen! I feel grateful that it did. Because like I say, it's like if I hadn't met this one person, or if they hadn't done this one generous thing for me at that moment, or if I hadn't heard that piece— Very likely, maybe I would have encountered it in some other way much later, but I'm grateful that it happened relatively early on. It's funny because I guess what I'm getting at is, there was nothing underprivileged about you know, just the fact that I'm in college and that I'm in a position to be picking and choosing what I want to do, and thinking about what I want to do, and is this right and so on. And yet there's something ultimately abject about the ultimate decision, that had really nothing to do with my choice. It had to do with a lack of power. It had to do with, in all that privilege, finding myself completely inadequate and kind of miserable and dysfunctional, and yet then finding, in that sort of despair or whatever, some other avenue, or some other means of functioning. It's like, out of that abjection, some opportunity to function differently.

This resonates for me pretty directly, too.

Yeah, I have a hunch that it does for just about anybody who's in this kind of work. Because, like I said, it's like, why would you do it if you could do anything else? It's like it's a kingdom only for us. Only in the context of our despair is this a kingdom. And it is a kingdom, and it's our kingdom.

For me, I was never that great a pianist, and realized I didn't want to do that, and then went on to graduate school for composition and then realized I didn't want to teach. And it's like, well where am I? What am I? Is this just a foolish thing to have done? And at the end of the time finding this one Lucier piece and this one Pisaro piece and performance that were like, oh, there's something between these two things, and then finding this connection by way of William James, and then finding it connected with something my father had written, and my father had died within the previous year. That's a very nutshell version, but it's interesting to read it through the lens of loss, too.

Yeah, exactly. I just feel like it's more honest, in a way. It's not through gain. It's through loss.

So even the word compelling, I thought of it when I wrote the question. What is it that draws you to it or makes you love it? But it's, how did you get to this point of need where that's the only thing that—

Yes, exactly. Exactly.

That's really interesting. It gives me a whole different read on what I'm asking.

Yeah. So it seems like survival. And in a way, it just keeps it real. It really is a matter of survival, figuring out how to find what's adequate to my need. And it really causes you to see something where most might see absolutely nothing of value.

That place gives a really necessary perspective, I think. The question about genres, I'm not sure if it's an interesting question, and feel free to tell me if it's not to you.

Was it about genres? I can't remember. Okay, ask it.

Do you identify with other musical genres or practices alongside this one, and do they complement each other or overlap? But if it's not an interesting question, just say.

Well, it is an interesting departure point, because the simple answer is no. But I think it's because I feel like this area of practice and life is sort of marked by, like you say, by loss, by separation from the whole, in a way, but a whole of everything before that wasn't providing. And so I could never approach it as a question of sort of like, I'm dabbling in this while I'm also doing that or the other thing. I can see why for some other people, these things are sufficiently distinct that you could be a session violinist for film music and also— Okay, so I guess it's getting into a more complicated question about the sort of setting and the location, I guess, of the sort of community

of this work. Because it's not so much about styles and genres, right? It's about affiliations and organization. And so it's kind of always been fascinating to me that people from all walks of life kind of find themselves in this area of work that I find sustaining, and that some of them are really dysfunctional at everything else, and yet others are perfectly functional in certain things, you know, as teachers, or they do something— They just treat it as something that they do on the weekend that's a separate involvement entirely from, let's say, from their family life or their work life. I mean, I'm thinking of— I want to describe this person in a way, for people who don't know her, that is not in any way disparaging, because I think she's great, and she's a terrific composer. Her name is Mari, and she goes by I think just her first name, so I'll respect that. And she kind of appeared at CalArts from the suburbs of Santa Clarita one day. She came to a concert. I believe I was performing with Michael Pisaro and Christoph Nicolaus. I think we were doing [Michael's] *Reading Spinoza* in October of 2004.[6] And she just appeared there. She was one of like five people in the concert hall, in the audience, sort of early 40s, Japanese woman, introduced herself as Mari, as being Japanese, as being a housewife in Valencia. And she just has always been there ever since. And I think it's great that she felt completely permitted to just basically start attending CalArts. Why not? It's like, I wish I'd thought of that, to just come and hang out, and be there all the time, go to classes, be in all the ensembles.

Oh, so she became a student there?

I mean, no, that's the thing! She didn't.

She just showed up. I love it.

I mean, that's the beauty of it. She never entered through any of the institutional waypoints or gateways, and thus proved that you could still do that at CalArts, that a lot of the life there was not institutional in nature. It sort of confirmed why a lot of us were there, actually, that it wasn't like a school. Because the sort of thing that would prevent her from being there without paying or enrolling, let's say, just at that time was not suppressing her presence. And so she was a full participant in all of these activities, and I don't hesitate to call her a cherished composer friend in the area, experimental musician, and I don't hesitate to think of her if there's something that needs other people to be performed, and as recently as last fall, we went out to Utah and performed this great piece in the desert there with a number of other women.[7] But I guess what I'm saying is, she never stopped describing herself as, "oh, I'm just a housewife." She thought of herself as a housewife. She was raising her kids, great mother, by all appearances. And just, you know, on the side, became an experimental musician. And she's sort of a fixture. She's just like any of the rest of us. And yeah, this is now 12 years on. I mean, she's a great friend. She's totally nuts in all the best ways. I'm just so grateful to know her and to sort of have her in my life, in our lives.

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[6] For reader and pianist, performed alongside videos by Christoph Nicolaus.

[7] *Brainchild Part 3*, a collaboration with artist Kathleen Johnson. Performed by Julie Brody, Kate Brown, Dominique Cox, Mari, and Gabie Strong at the Mars Desert Research Station near Hanksville, UT, October 11, 2015.

And she's just a housewife, she says. That's wonderful.

I mean, I hope that she thinks of herself— I feel like part of it was just being self-deprecating. But I always sensed, there was always a sense of great, like being totally alright with where she stood. There was an honesty in describing herself this way, that I just always thought was great. There wasn't any pretense, and that this was, the assumption is, like oh yeah, this is fine. Like she felt at liberty to say this, and know that she'd be completely included. It took her a while to get over her kind of insecurity, because, I guess when you stumble into it, there's this whole kind of chimera that there are these people who have been at it, and oh, you know, these are "real musicians." But I guess the point I'm making is that people fall out of all kinds of places into experimental music, and in a weird way, we're all kind of at the same level from the get-go. And I think, yeah, of course it's true that there are certain great artists that are practicing in that field that develop, and it's interesting to kind of follow where their work is going— As far as this idea of musicianship, and one's adequacy, I think it goes back to that original point of, there's this tremendous relief that anyone is adequate to the task if they fall into this place.

I think if people are happy to find themselves in it, or find it necessary to be in it, there's a reason for them to be there.

Yeah, exactly. Exactly. It's totally, their presence there is totally necessary, and it has nothing to do with technical virtuosity, or any of the things that kind of mark one's place traditionally. I always thought of it as sort of whack-a-mole, actually. Really, it was just like, I pop my head up, and it's like, suddenly you realize that you kind of look like a boob for asking the question, because why would anybody want to affiliate with this, ooh, this thing that's not even music. Oh, it's this weird— Well, there's no future in this. And then the beauty of it was, then it was like, oh! In the distance, you see another head that's popped up. But it's only fleeting, because it's whack-a-mole, and you're being whacked up there! But then you know that when you pop back down through the hole, that in that darkness, there's this whole underground kind of network of these moles that are like you, that find themselves there, that are, most of the day, they're down there in the dark. And then they pop up when they can. But there's like this daring excursion up to the surface into the daylight momentarily, but mostly it's underground, and you have the disadvantage of not being able to see each other. But once you catch sight of each other in those daring moments of breaching the surface, then you know that they're down there with you, and that's very empowering, in a way.

I love that image. It's like a literal reading of the game onto our field.

Yeah, it's like maybe the first time, you naïvely pop your head up, and you realize, oh god, I'm not going to do that again! You don't want to expose yourself like that, because it's almost like trying to hold onto some little, thin atmosphere, but with no magnetic field. And meanwhile, the solar wind is just blasting away. You sort of come to this lately and you realize, oh god, this is not good! This is not a tenable situation, you know. That the prevailing context you're going to find yourself in is, everybody wants to whack you. It really is. Again, I come back to this abjection. It becomes a sort of classed situation where you're going to be then drawn into a conversation where the whole point of it is that they're going to force you to continually have to

explain yourself to people who don't want to understand it, who won't ever understand it. You're going to exhaust yourself. You're going to waste every last ounce of energy just defending yourself to people who have no interest in listening. So you just kind of want to duck back out of that as soon as possible, and instead focus on building your life underneath. Building your life underground. Again, it seems so romantic and like a choice, like oh, and then I found this thing that finally did it for me. But really it's that you get hit so many times. It's happening constantly. Everybody goes, what do you mean? Because it's just what's supposed to be normal life. And you kind of get tired, or you get burnt out on having to hold up in that kind of environment, and you don't even know what else might be possible, because you start to get inured to the feeling of just being constantly shut up and alienated. And then one day, if you're lucky, you kind of fall through the floor, and you realize that you don't have to just be getting whacked all the time. And yeah, it's dark and dank down there, and it's lonely, but there's such a tremendous sense of relief. You can breathe, all of a sudden. You can learn to finally live down there. And the connections are maybe fewer and farther between than you might have been sort of bred to expect up on the surface, but you can actually make them, down there. Whereas that was prohibited before. That's the feeling. You can look back, and you think of how life felt like before and after, and there's just no question. This is where life is. So people fall in there from all kinds of places, and it's always, it's sort of interesting. Some people are perfectly able to kind of function professionally or entrepreneurially, some of them even in music, like Eva-Maria Houben, for instance, is a terrific organist and a terrific educator, and a published musicologist, not a fringe character in those areas. And yet she is an incredible composer. I love her work. And she hasn't really achieved any kind of professional legitimacy, as a composer— I think only now is she starting to actually have composition students at her university job, or it's like a fairly recent thing, like the last two or three years. But I think for a long time, it was no question that there was no kind of professional valence to her activities as a composer. What am I getting at with that? A little caffeine withdrawal, I guess.

I think I know where you're going with it.

I feel like that sort of horizon of need— The fact is, that's the kind of composer she is. She isn't also a kind of neoromantic composer, someone who fits into a legitimate kind of academic genre of music. As a composer, she is strictly the composer that she is, and stands in this one place, and not any other. So I guess I would have a hard time accepting the idea of someone who— Well, unless it was like, well, they're really good at writing jingles, and they could do that for money. I guess what I'm getting at is, the area where the sort of detritus collects, it fosters a need that isn't answered in other areas of life, and so I think ultimately, I have to say that the community of this kind of music coheres around the work itself, that it's not about people. It's not about whether they have careers or not. It's not whether they do it full time or on weekends.

It's about what the work is doing.

It's that they all find themselves needing to be there in the situation of a particular piece, even. You know, for five minutes or six hours. And everything that coheres around that is there because it needs to be there in order to survive. And it's like that part of all of our lives is sort of what we share in that moment. And it's sort of impossible not to define it in terms of the work

itself, I think, that ultimately sort of draws the proper limit and definition.

And trying to define it by personalities or sociologies or something would be pretty frustrating, and not have a whole lot of coherence in itself.

So the question of, like overlap— Well I can understand that people have complicated lives, and that they can— You know, if you can make a living in some area, then why not? And do that. But I don't think that this kind of practice can ever relate to anything else except by way of its separation from it. I think it does separate. I think it's that whack-a-mole aspect. I think it's sort of defined by the thing that can't live on the surface.

There's an article people have been circulating lately about this dystopic ant colony in eastern Europe.

Oh no!

I think you have to read it. I'll send it to you.

So the ants are not living as a happy colony?

They're not in conditions that should be survivable.

Ah! I see. So pioneers.

I just have to send it to you, because I can't possibly do it justice—

Extremophile ants, that's fantastic.

It's really something special, and disturbing, and somehow it feels like it could only happen in eastern Europe.

In the radioactive wasteland of eastern Europe, the post-industrial nightmare. Thanks to the glowing green shit that pervades the water and the earth.

I hope it doesn't create too solid an analogy with the analogy you've been giving, but there are connections.

There are. And maybe it's helpful that I've come now to the idea of the status of the work, because I think that that kind of reframes what I've been speaking about, abjection. I mean, whatever. I told my story, and maybe there are elements of kind of despair in that, but not really. How strange, that in the midst of a seemingly kind of privileged trajectory, one discovers one's abjection. But I feel like the status of that work is basically abject. Like I say, it's the stuff that can't— It's extremophile, it can't live on the surface. It's the stuff that lives underground. But more than that, and to the point of, even if one finds oneself being able to have an above ground professional life as a composer or musician, I think that by entering into this kind of work, that

marks the need to kind of turn one's back on all of that surface life and I guess unavoidably, what's produced in that other world or that other kingdom, that nether kingdom that we occupy together, it comes as an unwanted addition. Like it's abject from the outside, too. It will never not be abject. It has a refugee status. It's this unwanted thing that washes up on shore, and everyone around just kind of groans, oh god. What are we going to do with these?

Unless it finds them at a point where they realize they need it too.

Yeah. But then they become refugees as well. You're on one side of that or the other. At least the work is very clearly on one side of that, I think. It's like, this can be a temporary status, I guess is what I'm trying to— It's the space that opens up within the work, and it's the space of possibility that opens up in the context of that separation, that having-fallen-through, and that's where the vitality of this work is rooted, and it sort of unfolds in a kind of series or network of openly private encounters there. All those things color each other because, like— The latest IKEA catalog, it's just absolutely horrific. I don't know if you've seen it.

I haven't.

It's one of the only publications I get in the mail anymore. There's, like, refugee chic. There are all of these kitchens and add-on rooms that are all kind of, it's these temporary— They're styled after refugee camps.

Oh no.

Kind of— Well, it's very practical. This is a new kind of practicality that's emerging…

Are they invoking refugees somehow?

Yes, they are! It's humanized, because there'll be a picture of a little Syrian girl, you know, in Sweden or something, whose family lived in some— It's horrific but fascinating at the same time, because you realize that part of this status— It's like it's radically disempowered. But it's like you have this totally unprotected private life. It's this life that can always be intruded upon. Why? Because you're not in command of your own fate. You've been set adrift, right? And now you've washed up, and now you're in this state of exception. You're in the refugee camp. You're in the refugee situation. You're in this strange ecstatic state. And you have all of the burdens that come with this, but you also have all of the potentials, the possibilities that come with this. And it's fascinating that this image, they kind of realized— They were seizing on this. That you could see yourself and your life differently, by seeing it through this. Like all of these things that you can hang on your wall because you don't have a kitchen, or this way that you can have a bathroom without having a bathroom.

You don't have to clean the house because you don't have a house anymore.

Yeah, you could just fold it up and wash it with detergent and hang it out to dry. So, what am I getting at here…

I think it's finding that status, the energy that builds at the margins and outside of things, or underground.

Exactly, exactly. That's exactly it. That being kind of set adrift, being kind of cut off from any normal life, from any integral or synthesized existence, but being in a state of exception, separate, and sort of kept out. You have a unique opportunity to not have to deal with all of the things that encyst life at the center. You no longer have the onus of public presentation, because you can assume that you're only going to be able to engage in openly private encounters. You're in this tent, and you have to assume that you're being surveilled upon, or you can be at any moment, and that's just the fact of the situation. And it's kind of a relief, in a way, that you don't have to think about— And also, because you're on the outside, because you're terminally marginal, and yet immersed in all this actual immediacy, because you're just there in the privacy of your existence outside of anything official, in this state of exception, whatever ends up happening will not have been published. It's open. It's totally open to the world. It's exposed. And yet it's immune to publication, in a way, because it's that thing that can't be included. And again, I keep wanting to exit the idea of human despair, and I keep coming back to it. I'm really trying to describe this in more abstract terms, but I guess the current situation is too rife with the kind of human images and the tragic images, and the tendency to go there is too great. But I guess, think of Sappho, who wrote 2500 years ago, and is the quintessential lost poet. Literally, maybe one and a half poems exist, with maybe six dozen fragments on top of that, ranging from a few words to a couple of lines. The gift of Sappho, her legacy being transmitted down through the ages—in this state—can't be understated. One of the fragments is just the word soap.[8] It's just one word, soap. The beauty of it is that this body of work, it comes down only as these sort of fragments torn away from any context. And so the result is that they are available to us as such quite immediately. That is to say, not ensconced in the mediating amber of history that would surround, let's say, any more successfully published body of text. Soap is just soap for us, as it was for her. You don't even think about as it was for her, because that context is gone. All you have is this fragment. That's the beauty of it. It's pure, and you have access to its poetics as such in a totally singular way that's unlike any other work. So when we talk of Sappho, we talk immediately of just this collection of displaced fragments, these refugees that have washed up. And one of the other fragments is, "do not disturb the rubble."

Wow.

Yes, because this text disallows being presented historically, and only presents itself archaeologically. And so you have this rubble. And that's what we are, and that's what our work is and will have been. It's rubble. It's derelict. And therein lies its vitality. And therein lies its immediacy, because soap is just soap. You don't ask if it meant something different to Sappho, because you don't have the ability to ask that question. It's just soap. It's the soap that was written down on that page on that parchment 2500 years ago, just as it is the same soap that you pick up and read today. It's like a direct connection. There's a totally immediate connection across the ages between you reading that text and that text as it was written. It's just a pure record that maps directly. So I guess in a very deep way, I think of Sappho as a proper muse. And

[8] Oddly the Latin word for soap, *sāpō* seems to almost pun on Sappho's name.

I just love that. And again, it's like, you don't choose that. That's just what happened to eventuate the work of Sappho. That happened to that text.

It seems like she almost understood it.

Yeah, and that is what Sappho is, just as a body of work.

Should we go on to the next question?

Sure.

I'm so interested in how you're thinking through these things. It's really enriching for me. Most people I know in the field tend to have more than one role within it, so composer/performer/improviser. What roles have you taken on, and how do they sort of work together or not?

I think it's interesting as a question, because it kind of cuts two ways. I guess at one level, maybe because I'm paranoid, when I see the word roles, I just think, oh gosh, all of these kind of professional métiers that people think of. They think of themselves as professors, or as a composer or as an interpreter.

I wasn't thinking of it that way at all.

Right. But then on the other side, there is kind of this way that in a lot of this work, these roles aren't clearly demarcated, and that's also a testament to the kind of disempowered and derelict quality of where this work arises from, is that there's no investment in defining these roles. So there's a freedom for them to be explored almost ad hoc, in terms of means available, whatever that means in a given instance of a piece. It's the people involved, the instruments involved, the amount of time, and again, I think of, "do not disturb the rubble." I mean, you have this rubble, and then you make do with it.

So, the roles. I guess the reason why I said it that way, which is to first address the kind of institutional order of various roles versus the messier situation that comes to pass, is that I think that's a tension that exists, because I don't think that roles such as composer, performer, listener are all that discrete in the work that we do. I don't think that they're so discretely defined. And to the extent that they are, it's usually actually kind of an after-effect, or like a hangover of some institutional norm or other.

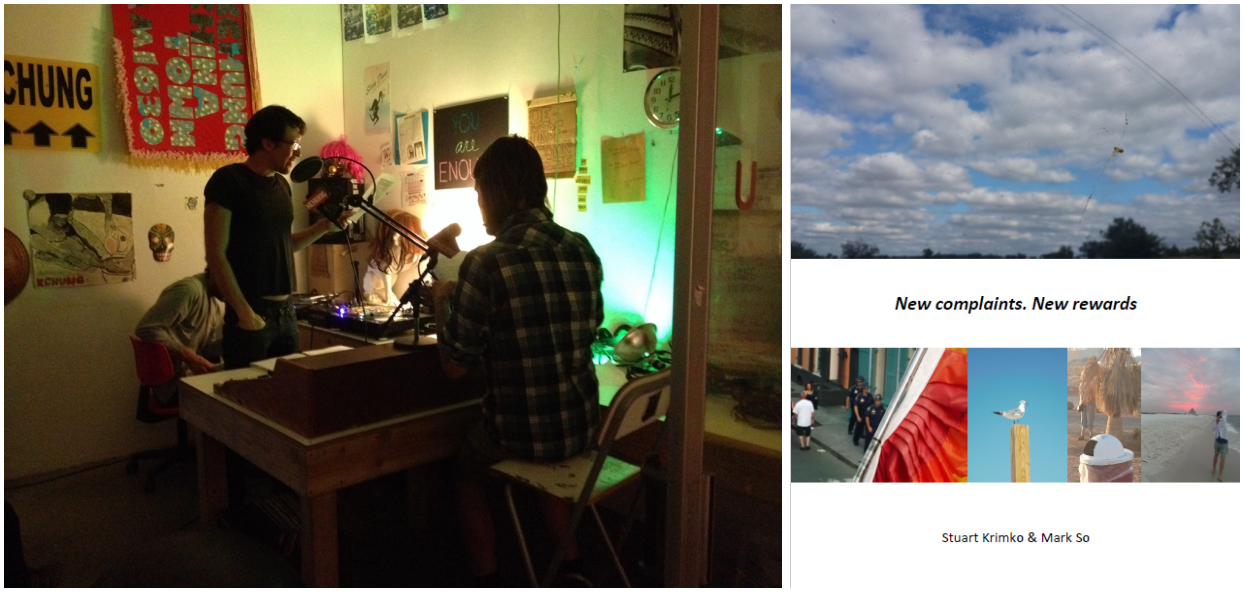
Training we've had or whatever.

Yeah, just in some way. There's any number of ways those things can enter. But it's kind of fascinating to me that we relinquish all of that bullshit easily enough when we sit down to play, and yet it's odd that we do always seem to kind of re-raise these terms, even in the act of dispatching the idea that they mean anything at all. They somehow get rearticulated and re-instanced.

I could imagine asking it in a different way.

Yeah, I know what you're getting at. Part of it is that when you want to keep things going, you realize that there also isn't a kind of rubric that provides for it, so you then have to be responsible to each other, let's say, and provide those supports that are missing. So it's as simple as, well, you're not the Los Angeles Philharmonic, so you don't have a pavilion to perform in, so somebody's got to provide the space, or we have to make some accommodation in this way, or somebody has to decide we're going to do it in this park, here. So I guess that's a role, like the role of the impresario or something, the presenter. But again, I feel like it kind of cuts against the idea of the role per se, because in the end, we're just being people doing what we can to care for this work in good faith.

Sepand Shahab (L) and Mark So (R) performing at Curtis Berak Harpsichord Services, during "a week at midnight," Los Angeles, March 24, 2015.



Left: Stuart Krimko, Mark So and Christoph Girard reading *New complaints. New rewards* on KCHUNG radio's The Talking Show during "a week at midnight," Los Angeles, March 19, 2015. Right: *New complaints. New rewards* by Stuart Krimko and Mark So, cover, DEATH-SPIRAL, 2014.

Make things happen that perpetuate it.

Yeah. I mean, is it even worth pointing out? There are just these basic things that are available to us as humans in terms of what we can provide to each other, and because we care about some body of work mutually, then we do what we can.[9] You can make space available, or lend one's

[9] This doesn't mean I don't organize events, though generally that's something that grows out of a desire to do or explore something in particular, perhaps with a certain person or people in mind. For instance, I did a series early last year called "a week at midnight," which included events ranging from a group of solos I performed at the wulf., to a cold reading of the play *An Untimely Visit* by Argentine writer Copi around a friend's kitchen table in Altadena, a chaotic keyboard event in a harpsichord and organ repair shop downtown, and the designated site of Du-par's diner in the Valley one night (with nothing else specified). I had all this collected material that I knew and loved, which I had been lugging around with me mentally, like a psychic library of texts, pieces, tapes, etc., but also just as significantly various people and places and rooms in and around my life that somehow connected and mingled with these things through the same thought process, and I really just wanted to reopen and revisit everything in a kind of sweeping togetherness rather than in isolation. Trying to preserve the whole messy heap while also tracking its shifting landscape of territories and ecologies, teasing out different tendencies within the collected activities, materials, and groupings of people and mapping them in non-arbitrary relationship to different spaces and settings. It was a conscious way to remind myself of what's possible, against my frustration with a certain routinized, compartmentalized way of doing things that seemed to have set in (like just doing another concert at a given venue at the usual time, in the context of an almost standardized set of relationships, etc.—not so much an enforced rubric as the outcome of inertia, I suppose). Along another line, a couple of years ago I started DEATH-SPIRAL, which is an outlet for recording and print projects that either died on the way to release or would be impossible to put out under any normal publishing auspices, due to copyright issues, etc. The most ambitious of these has been *New complaints. New rewards*, which is a big book and dvd, but really kind of a literary black hole that poet Stuart Krimko and I dug out from various shared experiences—a long drive along the Gulf Coast and down through the Florida Keys, some John Sayles films, *The Pelican Brief* (the movie, not the book), and a couple of Jules Verne novels, among piles and piles of other stuff—and lived in together, more or less, for the better part of

time, or—

Whatever it is. It's acts of generosity, really, and involvement, and just inclusion.

Yeah. There's just something about the kind of locus of some piece that you want to realize that is highly particular, ultimately. It's like you don't abstractly think, well, I'm going to undertake a realization of a particular piece by this composer, because I'm going to demonstrate something to people about this, this, and this. That would be academic, right? Or I'm going to educate somebody on this point. It's usually, by the time you get to that point, there are any number of deeply personal reasons why you feel like you have to invest yourself in realizing a piece of music that there's no question that whatever is between the people involved is the proper medium, and out of that sort of collective, the needs of the work are met out of the adequacy of the people who find themselves assembled in it.

I guess the more immediate necessity then is having enough people who care about it to make it, even if it's two or three people.

Right.

I guess things could happen alone too, but there's something about just drawing enough people together to create an event of some sort.

I hadn't really thought about that. That's interesting.

I just say it because I'm so isolated most of the time.

Exactly! The funny thing is that in terms of my own work, I've kind of stepped away from performing anyway, for the most part. It's like the performance at this point almost happens before the completion of the work, or in the process of completing it, because then there'll be some strange text or a tape that will result that doesn't necessarily have to— And then it's like you can play the tape, but it doesn't involve a person again. I'm being broadly general. There are [recent] pieces that do require me to continually make some kind of performative input. Yeah, that would be an interesting question. Like if there was a strong desire, a burning need to play, you know, Antoine Beuger's *ba da duos* and to not have a second person. That would be kind of interesting. I hadn't thought about that.

It wouldn't work as a multi-track sort of thing, I don't think.

I mean, I guess. Maybe it would? I don't know. How would one divide oneself into a duo? It might work. Yeah. It's true, though. I've done some larger pieces where I've had to just kind of organize a performance, and kind of ask widely, and just assume that people who respond really do want to do it.

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a year.

I think I sort of assumed for so long that there was no one in my radius who cared at all. And it's not true, I'm realizing. There have been people all along. I just didn't know them. But it's sort of like, well, I won't do anything. I'm just going to travel places and go see what other people are doing, because there's nothing here and I didn't consider myself a performer, whatever. So it's part of what drives it, is how is it that things happen? And it seems there's a lot that happens just through people who care about the work connecting with each other and bringing everything they have to it.

Right. Yeah.

And that leads into the next question, really. If there's anything else you want to say, we can go back.

No, that's— I'm just reflecting on how it is that for a long time after school here, after CalArts, there were a number of people around, and we seemed to be constantly involved in each other's work. I'm talking about like five to ten people, not that many.

Joseph Kudirka (L) performing *monodies pour mallarmé* by Antoine Beuger, with Mark So (R) performing his *lecture 2006*, "privat-publikum" series, Echo Park, Los Angeles, August 23, 2006.

That sounds like a lot to me.

Exactly. And it just felt like this abundance. And what I appreciated was, there would occasionally be something a little more official, or you got asked to do something, or somebody got asked to do something, and they would kind of— It's sort of an alien question for me, because it occurs to me that the period where I felt involved with a group of people functioning in this way on an ongoing basis kind of feels like it's in the past. And so I'm thinking of this moment from like 2006 to 2010, roughly, where for me, there were just a lot of people around, and there was, like almost on a daily basis, someone was going somewhere, there'd be an opportunity to go to someone's backyard and we'd be playing something, or running through something. Johnny Chang lived in this house with a bunch of people in Echo Park, and he and I really got into Istvàn Zelenka's music, and he started a series based on something Istvàn had described as privat-publikum, which is sort of this category in which he thinks of a lot of his work as taking place, in a kind of private public. And so [Johnny] decided to have a series on his porch called privat-publikum. The beauty of it is that you start to get used to a life when you're not even thinking about things that would reach the threshold of a concert. You could just show up to play two tones on the harmonica, and then you kind of feel very satisfied that you relieved that itch, whatever it was, that there was something you needed to do together. I remember one time, he and I— I had this series. It was more of a conceptual series. I called it FESTIVAL : and the idea of FESTIVAL :— There was a space between the capital letters FESTIVAL and colon, and if it was a later instance in the series, it would be like FESTIVAL (2) :, and then after the colon

would be the location of FESTIVAL.[10] And the festival was like a declaration of shenanigans, as it were. It would just kind of bound a space for 24 hours, and anything within it happening or not happening was that FESTIVAL. And it was kind of a cheeky way to get around whatever institutional crap, at the end of a few years at CalArts— If there was anything had been left undone it was like, well hey, do it now!

FESTIVAL (6) DESERT : Johnny Chang, Mark So, et al., Giant Rock Airport near Landers, CA, November 4, 2006.

We did a festival!

[10] In fact, the location precedes the colon.

We're declaring FESTIVAL. There's nothing they can do about it. Do it now. Anywhere in the main gallery in the next 24 hours, and you're entirely responsible for anything that happens. That kind of thing. But it kind of evolved, and there was this feeling of wanting to do it a few other times. And once we did one in the desert,[11] which is out by, in this particular case, it was Giant Rock Airport near Landers, California, in the Mojave Desert. And it was just an idea that Johnny and I wanted to go out there, but had a bunch of things we wanted to do, and that we thought would be fun to do out by this old abandoned sand airstrip in the middle of the desert off the road. And we thought, well, we'll make a FESTIVAL of it. An email went out, and then Johnny and I went out. And you know, we were basically the only people there, besides some people getting drunk firing off guns behind the giant rock, and some motocross lesbians whizzing by on what used to be the runway.[12]

La Monte Young, *Poem to Diane* ("Came a tiger with dew on his paws") at FESTIVAL (6) DESERT : November 4, 2006.

Perfect.

And it was perfect. And I think we didn't have any— For all the effort it took to get out there and find ourselves there, because neither of us had been there before, I think we played for a grand total of about 45 minutes and then called it a day. And yet quite intensely aware that this was just a small blip on the horizon of that 24-hour period, and that even in the moments that we were— I think we did play Antoine Beuger's *ba da duos* there, and I think I played Christian Wolff's *Stones*, and perhaps one or two other things. I think between the two of us, we probably

[11] FESTIVAL (6) DESERT : (Giant Rock Airport near Landers, CA, November 4, 2006).

[12] Johnny and I drove out separately, intending to meet at the old airport. I had trouble finding my way since it was off a dirt road and I didn't have a good map, so I stopped in at the Castle Inn, which was this bar in Landers (now closed) to ask directions. The bartender pointed me to an old-timer hunched over a mug of beer, who laughed at me when I said I was looking for the airport— "You waiting for a plane?" But then a woman in a motocross jumpsuit on the other side of the bar took a swig of beer from her mug and slammed it down saying, "Follow me!" As we exited she asked why I wanted to go out there, and I said I was meeting someone to play music. She said she'd just gotten out of a body cast after eight weeks (bike wreck) and was itching to hit the dirt again. Since her license was still in limbo she couldn't take her bike on the highway but would lead me out to the dirt road along the soft shoulder. Within half a mile she'd hit a rock, and I watched her and the bike vault perhaps ten feet into the air. The bike landed on her leg, pinning it down. I ran over and lifted the bike off, burning my hand when I inadvertently grabbed the muffler. Then she dusted herself off and hopped back on the bike, told me not to tell anyone at the bar what happened because she didn't want her girlfriend (maybe the bartender?) finding out, and took off down the shoulder again. When we got to the airfield, distant reports of gunfire drew our attention. "Bet they got beer!" she exclaimed and tore off across the sand, making for the pile of boulders around Giant Rock, about a mile away. Johnny pulled up twenty minutes later.

collaged four or five pieces almost simultaneously, sort of layered, almost kind of in silent transparency into that environment. Even for all that, even in that short period that we were sort of out there actively doing that, there were far greater things occupying the situation, the landscape and the wind and the people in the distance, and the bikers going by.[13] It was just lovely how much was provided by that situation, and how cared for we felt.

So there was this period when all kinds of things like that were happening, and then gradually, people kind of went off into their— I guess people just started to grow up.

And move to Berlin or whatever.

Well, not even move away, but like get jobs and families and not wanting to be poor, whatnot. But I have to say, there was an adjustment, because then, you know, we weren't really in each other's lives anymore, so the relationships became more formalized. And to me, the immediate feeling is like, now suddenly, by dint of all this, we're making ourselves deal with things that by rights we shouldn't have to be dealing with, but we are.

Like what kind of things?

Well, all kinds of divisions that weren't operative in our—

Oh, when you actually were interacting regularly.

Yeah, exactly. It's like, oh, now we have to schedule things. Now we have to decide how much time we're giving. Now we have to set up rehearsals. Like all of this...drear—

Next thing it's Robert's Rules of Order.

Yeah. To me, it just progresses these things towards alienated labor. And I still kind of battle the ambivalence that I feel towards that, because I certainly have a lot of affection for these people, and I'm grateful for the opportunities that we still have to interact. A lot of this kind of coalesced around the wulf. It became both the way to keep doing stuff and also the mechanism through which doing this stuff invariably started to take on a more formalized and slightly institutional

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[13] What we had on hand that day: Antoine Beuger's *dedekind duos/ba da duos*, Thomas Claburn's book *I feel better after I type to you*, Agnes Martin's *Writings*, Christian Wolff's *Stones*, my *3 sounds in 3 stones* and *Halley's Comet, Jupiter, the stars, the open field [late summer 1985]*, James Tenney's *For Percussion, Perhaps, Or. . . . (night)*, Manfred Werder's *stuck 2003(2)*, and La Monte Young's *Poem to Diane*. We each also brought an electric guitar, ebow, and portable amp. I brought a little glockenspiel, and some stones, as well. At one point the wind got the strings of one of the guitars going in a kind of harmonic drone, and Johnny held out an empty plastic water bottle to make other tones. While this was going on, the biker who'd shown me out to the airfield reappeared with another biker, ripping along the far side of the air strip in front of us, whooping and cheering, and this became as integral to what was going on as the continued gunfire and drunken yelling coming from behind the rock. The whole vacant episode was in fact cross-cut, beautifully so, with these various scenes in ways we couldn't possibly have anticipated.

public guise. And just for myself, that was always kind of hard to deal with. But I recognize, people do what they need to do in the rest of their lives, and I certainly don't cast aspersions on anyone for being able to make a living or wanting to provide for their families. I certainly understand that. But it does present certain challenges to one's continuing involvement. It does antagonize, at a certainly level, the ability to continue being involved and be open to one's involvement with this kind of work. And it's sort of frustrating and lonely, because it starts to feel like people pulling away, when for a while, they were all around. And then it's like, oh, now we can only do this when everybody agrees to a rehearsal schedule, and it's only for an hour or two here and there, and then the pressure is going to be on having concerts and curated events, and it just all starts to have a different feeling. And I realize that it's for practical reasons, but I can't help but think it also feels more like an accommodation. I don't mean that people's convenience is being accommodated. I mean also that practice is changing too, that it's being accommodated to something that it isn't, at a certain deep level. So then I start to think of people taking on these roles, like well, I can agree to be this person for this. Let's just say I'm going to handle this for that event. Because it does start to seem like a quasi-professional operation, acting like other musicians.

In my home area, in the Boston area, I feel like I'm not that great a citizen of the music world, or new music or experimental music, partially because I haven't felt a part of it, because I was away for school and I came back, but also because it's like life takes over, and there are these other demands and pulls and stresses and everything. Where traveling, it's like I'm going for an event and I'm there for that event, and whatever springs up around it, I'm game, because I'm there and that's what I'm doing. And that idea of things that happen on the margins or outside of something, it sounds like there was a period of time where that outside was life.

Exactly.

And things just happened, and now it's an outside again.

Yeah. And I feel on the outs. It's that kind of feeling.

That's really hard.

It is. On the other hand, it's sort of a corrective, because it's just like, Manfred Werder appeared [here in Los Angeles] in February for a couple of days, and we went to the lake [Westlake, in MacArthur Park] and did stuff, and he sat at my typewriter and did stuff. And yeah, it was just like reassurance that those real kind of encounters around work, just as I feel I need them, are perfectly available, and they do happen.

They're not just fictions or memories.

Right. Yeah, and it doesn't have to be compromised into, well, if you want to write an orchestra piece, we can program it on a series one day that we're working up towards, but we don't have time for anything else in the interim, you understand...

And we have to wait till this grant comes through.

Yeah, all of that. All of that stuff. You know, I'm sorry. I'm just going to put it bluntly. It's the equivalent of trying to take a losing hand and turn it into a winning hand. It just can't be done. It can't! And I really start to question— I feel like we who kind of gather in this sort of little dripping pool of subterranean life are kind of a congregation of losers, and I feel like we're all fine with that. We're losers, we're lost. We're with the lost. We're with loss. All of these things we've been talking about. And I just question— It's always presented as just a practical means to an end, but it still is what it is, which is like an attempt to entrepreneurialize. It just strikes me as an attempt to entrepreneurialize or professionalize or institutionalize something that at a very fundamental level is disorderly by nature.

Yeah, and resists success.

And I feel like that disorderliness wasn't chosen, but it is the opportunity that comes of that abjection. And yet that's the thing that gets given up. Things are rendered orderly. Things come to be rendered orderly. A good friend of mine, a poet, Eileen Myles, often reminds me of something that Thoreau wrote in *Cape Cod*, which is, "here a man can turn his back on the whole of America." She's written of that, and she's also spoken about it at various moments, including once while we were sort of traipsing around outside of Provincetown, as the sun was setting in this kind of Caspar David Friedrich gloaming, and really getting lost in the sand dunes. And what is the full meaning and consequence of that? We know he didn't mean, "…and look towards England." That's the one thing that's absolutely certain. He doesn't mean that. But to turn one's back on America and also to sort of be, in a sense, facing the abyss.[14] We tend to romanticize Thoreau as the guy who could elect to go off and turn his back on civilization and be with nature. And yet again, even for Thoreau, there was some need. There was something that wasn't being met, and there was a sense of probably having been abandoned by the order. It's not a kind of romantic refusal or act of dissociating, so much as one finds that one is separate, or that one has been cut off and set adrift, and one then develops an ability to find one's vitality in a kind of return to the wild. And that's really what I'm getting at, I guess, is that it just seems a little too civilizing to be trying to build nonprofits and ensembles and event spaces, to kind of make do and reconcile one's loser tendencies with wanting to make a living or take care of one's family. I really don't think that this work is on the civilizing side.

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[14] Eileen Myles cites this passage from *Cape Cod* in the essay "The End of New England," which in part develops the conceit in complicated, prismatic ways. There are processes of undoing, in language as in life, that emerge where the ground gives way. (I tried to explore this in a reading tape based on this essay, called *though we haven't read it, we know there is a script*; hear a 2-channel version here.) We made a pair of companion notebooks for each other later, very much in this spirit. Eileen's was a kind of improvisatory poem, ranging in small bits across the entire notebook so that reading it became an uneasy process of flipping through rather quickly but also constantly resetting and re-adjusting, recovering the sense of place and pace; mine was a series of two-page platforms for the hands to rest upon while performing various more or less idle activities, with the occasional addition of humming. The idea being to go small, to have a light and handy sort of thing and wind up with two parts of something that would turn out to be less than a whole, but more vital and unsettled that way: a little opening we make between us, turning away together to face it. I think for both of us the notebook has been a stage where that giving-way goes on, and we keep falling through the process of writing.

Eileen Myles and Mark So performing notebooks at PIETER, Los Angeles, June 2, 2011.

It's got a different gravitation.

Yeah. I think it's moving towards wilderness, and all that that entails. To me, community— Again, back to the whack-a-mole idea and things falling through underground. It's like in a plant community, where everything that's there is— It's not conscious. Everything there is in a state of networked chemical awareness at the molecular level. And I feel like that's what it feels like to be involved in the music that I care about. It's like a total actual intimacy and immediacy with all that comes together around it. And that's also what I meant when I wrote that the field asserts itself. Those connections, such as they can exist, they do exist, and they're felt, and they're effective, and they transmit energy, and there's your field right there. Everything's linked up from one molecule to the next. And I just feel like in order for that to happen, you have to be in that radically divested, kind of abject space, that state of exception, outside of history, lost and at sea, and not involved in, you know, the advancement of human civilization, building. I think that that's really the decision. And it's not a decision that one just sort of makes. I think it's something that's decided, that one finds oneself in the place where it's possible to drop down into a lower register, a more basic register, let's say, where everything becomes available.

So it's an entire experience, then, in this view.

Yeah, of course. Of course.

It's not an interest. It's where you are.

Yeah. It's where you can live. It's the community, it's the ecology that sustains that life. And so the idea of transplanting it out of— It starts to feel like the idea of transplanting it out of that ecology. And then it's like, well, it can't live outside of that ecology, not in the same way.

You start to see ensembles that get successful, and they seem cutting-edge for a time, and then they go and… Yeah, it loses something.

Maybe it's just because the lease is up at the wulf., where Mike was. I feel like there's been this whole tendency, it's sort of like this extended early mid-life crisis, by a bunch of overachieving individuals who, like me, came to this work from a place of privilege, and they never really gave

up on the other things that they could do well, and they kind of built lives. They have professional lives. They have careers. They have families. They want to do well. They want to do right by everything around them. They want to be responsible adults. But I think they also sincerely still care about this work. Because, again, why would they be involved with it if they didn't need what was there, need to keep coming back to that place? But there's this willful kind of optimism that dictates a kind of, I dunno, orchestral processing or event space processing. Like everything is just about, gosh darnit, let's carve out a niche, let's make this stuff happen. Let's make a place for this stuff and move it out of the refugee camp so that we can all be done with all that filth and squalor and, you know, have it both ways. And I really don't think it's possible. And every time there's sort of a sign that something is letting up along those lines, I get curious and hopeful again, that some more people will kind of fall into the dark wild place again, and other possibilities will start to be manifest again.

You're going to like the ant story.

Yes, I can't wait!

I feel like you've addressed the next one, but if there's anything more you want to say about communities that you feel a part of, I'm interested. But maybe you've addressed that with the last question.

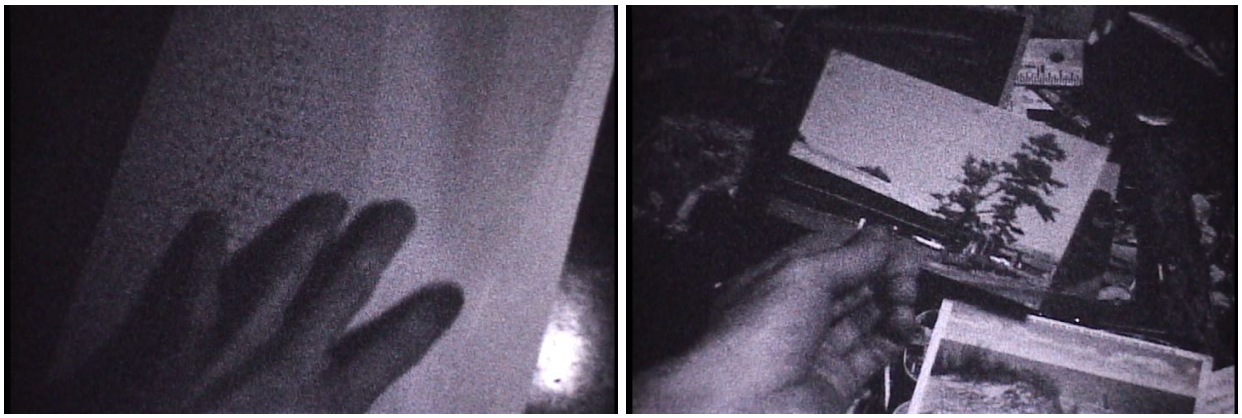
Right. Yeah, I guess the only thing I could add is that because of that weirdly kind of abject, marginal feeling, I don't feel as strongly as a lot of other musicians per se, that I know, this sense of division between what are normally thought of as different fields. I have a lot of experimental filmmaker friends, and a lot of poet friends that I'm probably more involved with than my musician friends, especially the poets, because they tend to be poor, and they tend not to have other responsibilities and other things taking up all their time. So they tend to be available and around to kind of bitch about stuff. But I think more than that, I just feel like the things that I find, that they connect, tend not to just be other pieces of music, but almost more so, tend to be films in some cases, and poems in many other cases. I would say that a lot of the work that I've found myself involved in has actually been with people who aren't musicians, per se, and who are not necessarily taking on the role of a composer, per se. I happen to be close to a pair of performance artists who— It's hard to articulate these things, [they do] collaborative work, but not in any formalized way [where collaborative roles and boundaries are defined at the outset], so in the case of this particular relationship there's Julie Tolentino, who's [principally] a movement based artist, and her partner, Stosh Fila, and they have a longstanding practice that I feel very connected to for various reasons. And I hesitate to simply say I have performed their work, because the nature of the work has a way of incorporating other people. [Having been in several highly singular performances that I couldn't imagine anyone but Julie and Stosh devising, they somehow always feel "ours": we become woven-in together, we are more *form* than performers.] And it's always different, somehow a different set of relationships is predicated every time. And I'm never doing the kind of things that I would ever— You know, they don't reflect my work. It usually involves my body, and I'm there moving. But it's not choreographed. I'm there as a medium, as part of a medium, just as my body, as myself, or whatever. And these things get worked through in some intuitive way between all the people involved. I feel like it's

definitely— I think of it primarily as Julie's [and Stosh's] work, but the nature of the work is to be hospitable towards the people involved. So at that level, it's not unlike being involved in a performance of a piece of music. It's just that the technical requirements, or the practical aspects of it, are a little bit different. But this sort of strange, very singular way of exploring how everything, all the different facets and members can coexist, and relate to each other and connect, is totally consistent for me.

Julie Tolentino, Stosh Fila and Mark So, *UNTITLED STUDY (for Tom)*, during Perform!Now! at François Ghebaly Chinatown, Los Angeles, August 1, 2010.

And similarly, I've been in collaborative writing projects with— Well, with the poet Stuart Krimko in particular, we made a book together, and that was kind of a year-long effort. These things are all very different, but I guess what I'm getting at is that I have many more of these experiences than I do "ensemble experiences," with a group of musicians or whatnot. They tend to be very, at this point, particular and singular encounters with other artists, or a series of encounters with another artist, and the work that develops out of that. And not something that defines itself outside of the particular mutual activity that is carried on between.[15]

[15] Dicky Bahto made a number of films in conjunction with my work, culminating in *Casual Encounters*, which uncannily captures a kind of visual marginalia, using a hand held Super 8 camera, often very close up and along the edges of various score pages, postcards, and other ephemera I'd generated and had come into his possession. He



Rick Bahto, *Casual Encounters*, Super 8 film stills, 2012.

And I guess that's maybe a dissonance that I have with a lot of people in experimental music, because I don't think of a group or a band or an ensemble, and so when there's something like the Dog Star Orchestra— I have no animosity. I hear myself naming things, and I think oh, this is going to sound like I'm just shitting on this, and it's not that at all. But it's kind of provisional and ambivalent, because I don't care about being part of the, quote, Dog Star Orchestra. I'm interested in whatever I'm involved in.

In its specificity.

Yeah, like the particular piece that I'm involved in, and the people that are in that piece, etc. etc. And I'm not interested in the paper affiliation. And it's kind of gotten difficult because— Oh god, I don't know how far I want to carry this.

You can always cut things too.

Sure. I don't know. I can't really go back. It used to be this sort of thing that was all hashed out on a very personal level, and I realize that it's gotten larger, and has, as a result, needed to become slightly more bureaucratic. But the result is that now, I get an email, a form email that goes out to everybody that is co-signed by three people, and it's saying things like, we would like your participation. We would like an agreement that you will play in an orchestra piece, and you will also get a piece played if you agree to that. And it's just like, that's totally— I don't want to engage with this whatsoever. And it's like, these are people who used to send me personal emails, but now this is how they communicate with me. So if I'd gotten an email from Michael asking if I wanted to play in a particular piece, I probably would say yes. But when I get an email, a form letter from Michael Pisaro, co-signed by Colin Wambsgans and James Klopfleisch, addressing itself in this bizarre way eight months in advance without any specificity, then I don't want— I understand that for some people it's more convenient, and less time consuming to

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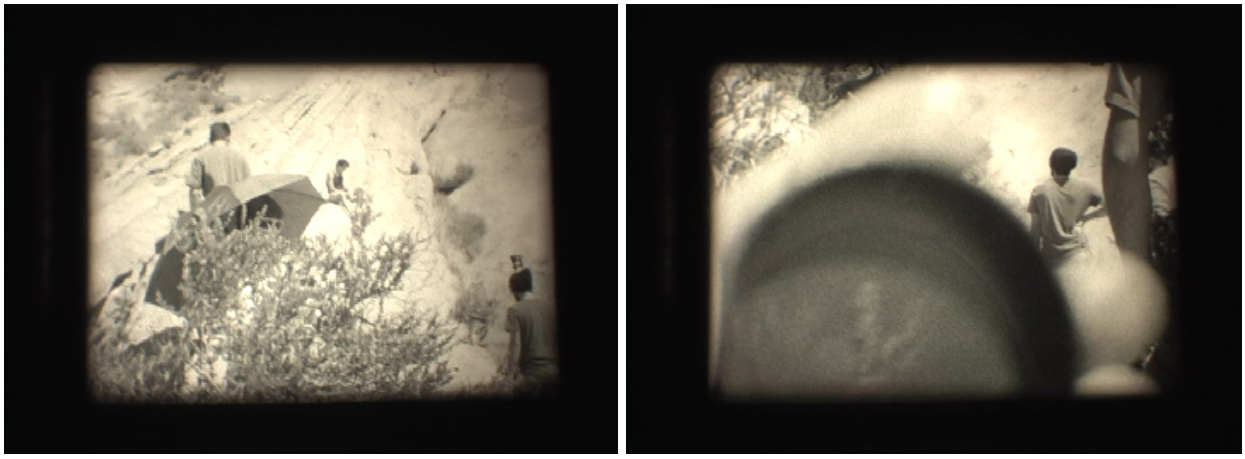
simply got all these things out in his bedroom to look at and handle, enjoying them as a collection of quaint materials and filming the experience. This is by far the most direct and astonishing mirror anyone has held up to my work, catching it by the ragged edge at its most fleeting and marginal, where it's hardest to pin down. But I haven't seen it in years and we're no longer friends.

operate this way, and that's probably all that's going on, and it's fine with me. But I can't function that way.[16]



Rick Bahto, stills from *Performing marmarth*, Super 8 film made during a performance of *marmarth* by Mark So, the Dog Star Orchestra at Vasquez Rocks, CA, June 9, 2010.

Katie Clark, Julia Holter and Mari perform *down among the plants and whatever insects* by Mark So, the Dog Star Orchestra at Vasquez Rocks, CA, June 9, 2010.

[16] I should add that I've been more or less involved in the Dog Star series every year save one, having performed in a lot of music and even had a collection of my "landscapes" (curated by Michael Pisaro) performed at Vasquez Rocks. I also conceived of a distributed event one year, called "a few rooms around town." But lately I've found myself participating without really planning or intending to, just when someone on a program wants me in their event, like the composed literary panel Samuel Vriezen presented one afternoon in Chinatown this summer, or when Mike Winter asked me to be in a group doing some independent activities down by the Los Angeles River last year at dawn. This level of participation suits me fine. And it's evidence of the continuing generosity and inclusiveness of the series that I can still be in the things I want, without having to get on board with the official program. Besides which I can't deny that remarkable things continue to happen under its auspices, like this year's outstanding performances of Michael's *Tombstones* and Cage's *Atlas Eclipticalis*, or the indescribable vocal/movement work that Carmina Escobar and Emily Lacy presented at the Bronson Caves (TV's Batcave) in Griffith Park.

Something gets lost there that is part of the necessity of it.

Yeah. And I guess what I'm getting at is, I realize that this differentiates me from a lot of people in the experimental music community, because it's really the level at which I guess by and large one can accept the idea of a collective identity that one can hold a place in and come and go from. And I just can't. I feel like the whole rubric of the setting of the kind of work, the kind of experimental music, the kind of work that I'm interested in, lives in, is something that organically, ecologically arises from its instance. I don't see how it just sort of passes into the hands of a pre-existing, kind of semi-produced entity or apparatus. To me, that sort of detracts. It doesn't necessarily. [But] I would tend to want to invest energy in exploring things the other way than in building a framework that, quote, makes things more convenient. Because that is how institutions change you. It's never a nefarious thing. People don't turn to the dark side and become evil. It's all practical. It just comes out of how you end up having to live your life in an institutional context. And things just seem sensible, and then before you know it, it's a completely different thing than it was. And all of the advantages that came from being marginal have been kind of accommodated.

Been shoved to the center, and it's time to get out.

Yeah, because you start to feel alienated again. At least I do. And then it's just, I have to fall out of this now.

[I go on to talk about a friend's perpetual frustrations within academia, finding himself more secure in some ways yet overwhelmingly beset by institutional limitations.]

[At this point, our call is disconnected.]

Hello?

Hi, I don't know what happened—

I don't know, either.

That's weird.

The CIA. The FBI.

The FBI? They're onto us.

Yeah.

All this underground activity…

We've been flagged.

What are you working on now, in whatever capacity?

It's funny, there is a publication project that is somewhat imminent. Tim Johnson, who is the proprietor of the Marfa Book Company [and a poet], is someone I met about eight years ago, and for whatever reason he really clicked with the work I was doing at the time, in particular this group of pieces I call the Ashbery Series.[17] There's hundreds of them, and they start in 2006, so really it's a 10-year project at this point. At the time, I thought of them as scores. The interesting take that he had was he saw them as poetry. He has a vast affection, interest in all kinds of modern and underground poetry, poetics, and also a lot of weird music. And he was a friend of a friend, and one day I walked in the bookstore, he just kind of slammed his hands on the counter as I walked in the door, it's like across this big room— he's like, "Mark So, I want to publish the Ashbery Series!" I was like, "Okay! Yeah." And you know, we're about five years hence, and it's just very close to coming out. The last time I was there in early August, it was nearly, nearly, nearly finished when I left.[18]

Mark So, *a box of wind* - *Ashbery Series: 2006-2011*, Impossible Objects/Marfa Book Co., 2016.

That's exciting.

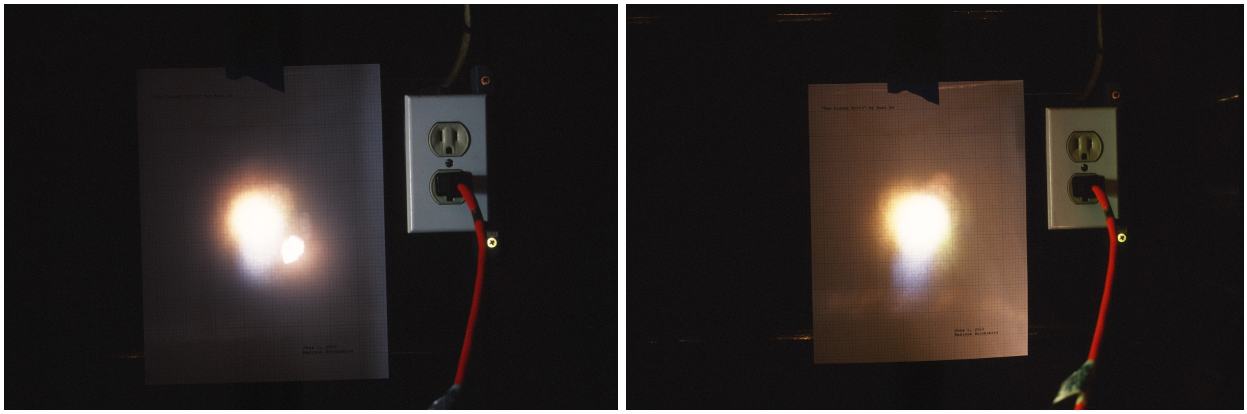
It's basically a box of the first 290-some of these pieces from August of 2006 through about July, 2011. And they basically cover the entire period where— I basically think of them as scores, as that kind of text, even though Tim's interesting point of view is that, no no, this is also poetry, and this engages a particular, unique poetics. And it kind of lets off at a moment where they stopped being scores, as I call them, and start being something else, like some kind of typed document or transcribed text. But the convenient thing about that selection is that the vast majority of those pieces are basically letter size PDFs, and they almost all have a one page format where there's sort of an extract from a poem of Ashbery's. And I've gone through eight or ten books' worth over the course of the series. At first, I started kind of dodging around through

[17] Involving the poetry of John Ashbery.

[18] It's now been released.

the *Selected Poems*, but I gradually became completely fixated and methodical in covering everything. So there's usually a little excerpt from the poem floating in the midst of other text, some of which is very sort of perfunctory. There's the title. There's my name, there's a date, and the location. And then there's some other bits of text that are my score, per se. But always from the start, the relationships between all these different aspects of the text were a little bit less straightforward, and sure enough, the series has sort of developed, I think, through the kind of relationships between all these different layers, to where it's like every one of these pieces basically has multiple locations. They look back to the poem. They're there on the page. They're in a particular place where the score was completed and is documented, in a particular place and time. There's the potential to be performed. But that's another sort of interesting aspect. I mean, some of them are straightforward, you know, things to do and I tell you what to do. But a lot of them really slow down that process of realization to where— I think maybe Madison Brookshire pointed this out to me at some point, or maybe I pointed it out to him in talking with him about it? I can't remember anymore. But I just came to realize that there's a whole process, that you become engaged in this text score on the way to realizing it, where the realization was already underway in your consideration of the score, even before and up until the point where you then perform it, per se.[19] And it sort of became productive to kind of— At first, I was sort of despairing that so many of these pieces would go unperformed. And then I started to realize that they're actually opening up a huge space of that whole period before one performs a score, and that that was actually very active in these pieces, that there were a lot of dynamics underway within the experience of reading— Of making, of reading, of these pieces in relation to each other, that had nothing to do with then actually performing them, per se. So they've kind of migrated in and out of the field of text scores in all kinds of crazy ways. But really, they're just this stack of documents, more or less self-similar, with a handful of interesting anomalies that we've found ways to incorporate. But it's basically everything in that series from August, 2006 through July, 2011. It's kind of strange for me because this is now all work that I did between five and ten years ago, and I'm having to keep contending with it, which is not something I normally like to do.

[19] Madison Brookshire has carried this a step further, from a different productive margin: his realization of my Ashbery piece *the casual drift*—in which he attached a sheet of graph paper to a wall in his studio, covering a hole to the outside, thus leaving the paper exposed to the cumulative effects of sunlight and weather—has generated a secondary stream of material, mostly in the form of color slide photographs, offering a direct tandem record of moments along the open-ended course of the piece while also fragmenting from it, breaking off from its continuity to build entirely new works of Madison's in their own right, which in turn transmit the retinal images of light passing through so many past presents of the initial piece.



Madison Brookshire's realization of *the casual drift* by Mark So, Los Angeles, 2010- .

Madison Brookshire, "*The Casual Drift" by Mark So*, slide series, Presents Gallery, Brooklyn, May 2011.

It's again the publication process.

Yeah. And it's, again, it's just sort of somebody else offered to do it. I'm like, okay, I'll ride along with it. I'll go along and see where this goes. And the great thing is that it's taking a shape that I never would have managed to foresee or to pull off on my own. It's just a document box with all the pieces stacked in it, chronologically top to bottom. But they're not fixed in there in any way. You remove them, and they can be scattered to the wind— It's called *a box of wind*, and the very first piece is titled *a box of wind*, which is a quote from— Which poem? Right now I can't recall.[20] But yeah, that whole series, I told John this once, somehow reflects what to me is the experience of reading his poetry in general, which is that of looking over the shoulder of somebody having a musical experience, who is transcribing it. And so in a strange way, then, the score is also already before the score. I mean you can't say that it's the poem, because it's somehow this strange extraction, or this kind of focusing or narrowing that I've come to productively, out of reading the poem. And yet, I'm very deliberately— I'm not trying to set the poem. It's not text setting, although there are pieces where you just read the poem in a certain way. It's not an interpretation. It really is an attempt to produce a certain music that is in the poem. In effect, I approach the poem as a kind of score, and then I produced the music in the act of writing the piece, I guess is one way of staging the process in a very short-handed way. And an interesting thing that happened is, after a number of

[20] "An Additional Poem" from *The Tennis Court Oath* by John Ashbery.

years, because the result is, of course, you get a very singular— It's strange that you have a somewhat common format, and yet what it holds is actually a very fine and singularly wrought music, because it comes out of a very specific encounter with that specific text. It's just a secondary outcome of a singular encounter, of a reader with a poem, kind of like what I was talking about with soap getting handed down from Sappho. That's my relationship with poetry. I guess it's unavoidable. It conducts an immediacy, and this Ashbery series is now, you could say it's like the story of all of these kind of immediate encounters that I've had. I mean, immediate— I use the term loosely. Some of them take a long time to come by. But the poem is never kind of a secondary or supporting player. I'm always aiming for something that is produced out of a direct contact, that's somehow between, in the process of reading the poem, and then reinscribing it, as it were. So there's this bizarre kind of diaphanous screen hovering between poetry and music for me, that cuts through language, that has animated most of my work for I guess about ten years now, at least, more than that, that has primarily been explored through John Ashbery's poetry. And I continue to do that. The things that I'm working on now, just to show you how far things can depart in a short space of time— Okay, so there's that collection of almost 300 things that are kind of on the edge of being text scores, involved in poems. And now, I'm working through [Ashbery's] *Hotel Lautréamont,* which is a collection of poems from around 1990, and I guess the thing that launched me into this current set was, it sort of permitted me to reread *Maldoror* by Isidore Ducasse, the Comte de Lautréamont.[21] And I don't know, there was a profoundly deep connection between the two for me, just in terms of the quality of the imagery. And it's sort of often and maybe unfairly said that Lautréamont is the father of surrealism. It's really just that that work was rehabilitated by the surrealists in the 1920s, and basically accommodated to their ideology. But really, it just kind of fosters almost all modern literature and poetics as we understand it. And I just feel like *Hotel Lautréamont* sort of takes as a starting point this image of Ducasse on his deathbed at the age of 24 during the Siege of Paris, this unknown human creature who had produced this completely self-destructive oeuvre, who would basically leave nothing of himself, just be a cipher. And it sort of unpacks the lexicon, as though Lautréamont could be reimagined as dying a multitude of deaths in the midst of a multitude of fevered hallucinations, in a multitude of rooms in a grand, imaginary hotel.[22] And there was a very particular image in one of the scenes in *Maldoror*, where the speaker, whoever it is, hallucinates themselves looking out across African, I guess Sub-Saharan savanna, and things are blurry, and there's what look like a pair of legs perhaps, which then one starts to realize is maybe a pair of baobab trees, and then those two become four. And I don't know, I found this— It's such a wonderful passage. I immediately realized— There's something I had been wanting to do with text, which was to sort of select it by just sort of tracing my fingers through the text. And, I don't know, it was something that occurred to me, but it was sort of inchoate, like that would be nice to do someday, but it hadn't cohered into anything. And then suddenly I thought, oh, I know exactly what this is— I traced my fingertips through the poems in *Hotel Lautréamont*, and then a second time with kind of a small glove on, so like a slightly grosser trace of the same hand, perhaps picking up some of— And then just collecting, you know, just removing, drawing

[21] Ducasse's nom de plume.

[22] I am hewing to a very narrow reading of what is, in fact, quite an expansive poetry collection. Nonetheless, this perversely single-minded perspective marks my cut through it.

fragments from these poems, strictly by taking all of the words and punctuation that kind of come along that arc of the trace, a little crescent trace around my fingertips, and just thereby developing a fragment of five smaller fragments that are all just forced into lines. And then I think of these as these kind of "Lautréamont bagatelles." But they're all these kind of hallucinatory images of what are already kind of hallucinations, almost as though the shady hand of Maldoror were being laid upon these pages and darkening them, twice.

That's perfect.

Yeah, the way they've come together— And you would think that this would just be a really snappy, kind of automatic— But in fact, they've been quite laborious, not from the tracing aspect, but because for whatever reason, each one has had to be connected to a particular person. Like in other words, each one gets gifted to one person. And it's like, I'll sit down and do a lot of the tracings, but it takes some time for me to connect a particular one with a particular person that will be the recipient of this hallucination, or this bagatelle. And then the form it takes is, I have to find some medium, some slip of paper, usually a folded piece of paper, that has been sort of persisting in my midst, and then some envelope, also, to put the paper in. And then when those things have come together, then I'll type the one sort of fragmentary transcription onto one side of the paper, and then the other onto the other side of the paper, let's say, if it's a one page poem. It's very simple that way. And then some of the words are sometimes doubled between the two, and you kind of oscillate between the two. I was thinking of that toy, actually, where you have the bird in the cage, you know? And you draw the picture of the bird on the one side of like a coin, you paste a little circle with the bird on the one side of the coin and a picture of the cage on the other, and maybe there are two holes drilled in the coin, and then strings are passed through and it's wound up, and you pull on the strings. And as it turns around, it creates the optical illusion that the bird is inside the cage. So you have these two things that are kind of inextricably bound together, in their opposition. But that's already hallucinatory, you know, because the bird isn't actually in the cage, the cage is drawn on the other side. It's just the rapid alternation of images that creates— It's only within the image and the appearance, and it's in the reality of that appearing that it's actually trapped. So I'm just blathering on in describing this project...

No, it sounds totally fascinating.

And then the name of the poem is parenthetically typed onto the envelope, and the name of the recipient, and then my name and the date and location, then it gets sent to them. Just this little bound, you know, packet of detritus. That's really what it is.

Are you keeping copies of it yourself, or is it ephemeral?

I take photographs. I take a photograph, so I cheat a little. I have a scores blog, and I put them up there with all my scores, even though these aren't really scores. They're just these bizarre things, these bizarre typed objects or texts. It's like by doing this intensely kind of personal thing, I kind of open this text, and then I transmit it to one other person, and produce that. I don't know, the flavor of having this thing that's just open and available, but then reduced to this totally private exchange, somehow appeals to me.

That sounds right, somehow.

Yeah, and then the two of us end up becoming kind of involved again in that image, in that appearing.

There are a couple people that I know who both—well one's Canadian, one's American, who are based in the UK, who are doing things that involve these immediate personal connections and ephemerality. One is Michael Baldwin, and he sends these letters to people. I'm not sure if he's still doing it. It was a few years ago he talked about it. But these pieces evaporate with the sending. And the other is Luke Nickel. His scores are transmitted as oral documents, and it's a whole other process. It's interesting when the delivery mechanism becomes part of the work, and it's located in the transmission as much as it is in the more traditionally understood content.

And I also love the idea that I'm actually doing a faithful reading of these Ashbery poems. Like it couldn't be more deep and intense a reading. And then to kind of reap— And then there's this way in which a poem always produces a kind of speaker and listener that are always different from the poet and the reader. It's that unique voice of the poem. It always presents an abstracted image of, you know, kind of two people in a room, at a certain level, and I'm kind of producing that. But still within the poem, still, you know, with no distance from the poem. It's like I'm producing that as a connection between myself and another person through this weird way of breaking the text off, with my fingers. But it's also just like little bits of garbage, too. It's completely beneath contempt.

But it sounds like that's a place where you are comfortable.

Exactly, just to bring it full circle. I guess what I was getting at by bringing up the strange feeling of having to work on that publishing project— I don't often look at the sweep of, like, ten years. And I tend to also have a spotty memory, like I tend to be the last person to notice a continuity in my own damn work, until the stink is so strong it's like, holy cow, I was actually doing that but in another way, five years ago. It's always reassuring, because I know that I didn't deliberately do that, and I'm actually being objective in recognizing this connection, now that it's strong enough that anyone on the outside could see it, because in a weird way— It never depresses me. I guess I fear it, because I worry that I'll be like, oh my god, I'm repeating myself. But really it's more a feeling of oh, this actually *is* something. Like this is a life, and it has its own internal consistency, and I'm reassured that it's asserting itself. Here I think I'm going off the deep end, and here I see, even here, a rearticulation of an old tendency that I wasn't even thinking about. But I also have been working a lot with tapes and field recordings. That's been an oddly productive kind of case. It started out as a sort of deliberate effort. I was deliberately working in tapes, around the time that the Ashbery series sort of changed from being scores per se, at least in my own reckoning, because I saw it as a way of having an elegant structure that would obviate any need for a score. I remember thinking about it that way. The great thing about making a tape is I don't need to score this activity, because the tape itself presents all the coherence that this will need. All the definition needed is provided by the tape. And that sort of changed my whole mentality. But what I was starting to say is that as I look back, I find it incredible how uptight and nervous things looked not that long ago. And I remember at the time thinking, oh, what a

relief! This is so open and straightforward. Nothing could be more direct. And yet I always find that every so often, a new, lower plateau— The floor breaks, and I sink down to a new level, and I think wow, what was I doing holding things up there when it's so much easier to dwell down here? Look at how much more room there is down here. Every time you think you hit bottom it's like the floor falls again, and there's sort of a new minimum. And it's also reassuring to feel like that's never going to— It seems like you would eventually hit, you would zero out and there would be no further to go. But I haven't really found that yet. And that's actually very reassuring.

But it sounds like that first one was with your piano teacher giving you the Cage piece.

Sure, absolutely. Yes, thank you. I mean really it's the perspective that you gain when you find yourself on the other side of that, and you suddenly realize that this is a starting point and not where you go to die. This is where a life can spin out from. It's definitely true. See again, it's like thanks, you have to remind me of that point, because I'm still amazed, right? At the, kind of the loamy richness of the new lower. You know, is it possible, could there be a new—? Of course. Of course it'll just keep opening and unfolding. It's the generative gift of what you gain from losing so much, from that initial loss that kind of got you here.

Man, I'm so glad you're going to read this ant story. It's all about this.

I am too. I can't wait. It's going to make my day.

It's really bleak, but I think you can appreciate it.

Nice. I always want the story to level with me. I don't want it to sugar-coat things.

There's no sugar-coating here.

I'm often comforted by bleak. Ah, yes. No deception here. The full, stark reality is before us.

Mark So and Manfred Werder in MacArthur Park, Los Angeles, October 1, 2013.

I feel like you've started to get at this in the last question, but what work or topics are you most excited about these days? And that doesn't have to be in sound. It could be.

Right. Aside from my own work, which I find very involving, but that's very self-involved, I mean that's true for all of us, right? I really love— There are a few people whose work I just love having around and being around. I love Manfred Werder's work very, very much, and I just am grateful for his friendship and for this strange way that we've managed to keep running into each other, now in Los Angeles, now in New York, now in Berlin, perhaps years apart. And yet we can come back together and just have such an intense moment, a productive moment, where there's no— I mean, that moment, where it's our friendship, and our work separately and mutually is all co-extensive, you know, for a few hours, or for an afternoon, or for a couple of days. It's just a wonderful thing to be able to share with anyone. So that's one that I think of off the top— Basically, it's the relationships that I have with certain people whose work I feel involved in. Just for whatever reason, they're people with whom I'm friends because we have a similar kind of attitude about the work that we do, where it kind of involves a process that doesn't really know any boundaries. So in a strange way, just to be together is to also be sort of extending the life of that subterranean network.[23] I'm just grateful for the people that I have in my life that continue that feeling that we're involved in each other's work and lives, and not just having that relegated to, you know, working up to a concert. And so I take it where I can find it, and I'm grateful for it. But it's strange, because I know most people would say X artist and Y poet and C painter, and—

Manfred Werder typing in Mark So's apartment, Los Angeles, February 18, 2016.

[23] Manfred and I have also lately come to incorporate each other's work into our own practices. Since last March, Manfred has been doing month-long realizations of individual scores of mine, in tandem with a piece of his, *2016/0*, whereby the two scores effectively frame all the practice and experience that passes in that span of time, basically inflecting his life for that month and leaving small impressions here and there, be it in the form of the polaroids of skies or trees he takes daily, or the occasional fleeting moment of typing whenever he happens to cross paths with a typewriter. Meanwhile, I've been incorporating many of his found words and sentences as portable library material for an ongoing field reading-recording tape I've been making (*readings 54*), and on several occasions I've used tapes I was in the middle of recording to realize pages from his piece *for two performers*.

Polaroids by Manfred Werder, Westlake, Los Angeles, February 18, 2016.

No, but this is how it works for you.

This is how it works for me. I tend to avoid concerts and museums, things like that. I just have a great sensitivity to the kind of mediated experience of— And I resent it, I feel like it's coming between me and the work that I want to experience. I mean, the worst is like an experimental film screening, because oh my god, that community is so defensive and insecure that everything has to be presented with an hour of preamble, discursive preamble. You can't just present nebulous work that has—

That sounds lethal.

Well I mean, the work is wonderful, but for whatever—

Well it sounds like the worst way to present it.

Oh, I agree. But I feel like the worst way to present Agnes Martin's paintings is in a museum, and the worst way to present a piece of music is in a concert. And that's neither here nor there, that's a very common complaint, but it's just something about— You think you're in a theater,

and the lights are going to be off, and you're going to have your fully kind of private encounter with the work, and then you get there and they've decided that they're going to talk for an hour before it, about this, that, and the other, you know. It's like public address. And eventually that wears on you, and you become less receptive to having an experience, and that's kind of how that works. So yeah, I find that I require that kind of unbounded involvement.

That goes along with all of it. That really resonates with what you've been saying.

Yeah, whether they're poets or musicians or filmmakers, there's a handful of people that I feel— I think it's because of the personal connection that I have with them that allows me to nurture a sustained contact with their work, which sort of qualifies it as work that I just really cherish and love. It also— I mean, it's work that I think is great. But it definitely has a lot to do with the fact that the artists are sensitive enough to know that caring for that work seems to involve setting up the special conditions that are kind of ripe for encountering it in a non-parsimonious and non-withholding way. And that can be as simple as just making yourself available, sitting across a table. You know, with Manfred's work, that's literally all it entails. It's just that you get together, and in an ad hoc way, you agree to do a page of this or that, and then you do it, wherever you are.

And it happens. There it is.

Yeah, and I love it. And you would never dream of— You know, you're both there. You had the experience of whatever little incredible things happened that you never would have expected. You know, a chicken walked by or something. And you would never want to rehash it either. You don't want to have a symposium afterwards. It's like you realize that you're in the realm of, before it happens, the hitherto unimaginable, and after it happens, the unspeakable. And you're just grateful to have shared the experience. And in a sense, it will not have been published, but it's left a mark. It's been inscribed.

In lives.

In the only way that it can be. It sort of wrote itself, because it wrote us in the process. I don't know. I'm just dancing around the question.

No, but I think you've answered it in your way.

Yeah, do you think? Okay. If you think I've answered it then I'm happy.

Yeah. I'm very happy with that. And I feel like, with another of these interviews that I've done, I feel like the questions have been rewritten by the answers in a way that's much more exciting to me.

And also, it's part of why— I know out of the blue I talked about how each of those Lautréamont transcriptions ends up being addressed to an individual. But that's been a part of my work for a long time. Joe Kudirka pointed this out to me. He was drawing a map of interpersonal

dedications between composers. And it's made me realize just how many things that I've done and pieces I've written have had an explicit dedication to somebody, the vast majority of which are kind of unexplainable dedications, but very, very meaningful ones, like very much, I felt myself in the nimbus of that person's care and their work in the making of whatever piece. And there's some level at which there's an attempt to reflect that. It's not like a description so much as it's just a way of pointing to a connection that I know is real. I mean, inspiration is somehow too loose a word to describe this kind of—

It's a lot more specific.

Yeah, exactly. It's singular. It reflects an encounter, a layer of encounter. And again, it's just a way in which the field is articulated. One just instances these points of contact, and then the light bulb turns on, and you see the whole room.

I feel like I know from what you've said otherwise how this question gets addressed, as far as what could be done to improve the field generally, locally or internationally. It sounds like it's about actual, meaningful connection between people and work.

Absolutely. And again, I don't want to be dreary. I don't want to be a scold. I'm really not holding anyone's life against them. But—

This is your experience, and this is how you're—

Yeah. I could always do with— I always wish for more of an embrace of the full potential, the full kind of otherworldly potentials of things coming together that are proposed by radical works. That's what they do. In that rubble heap is a completely different vision of how life can exist, and to find yourself there is to find yourself in need of those other conditions. So inevitably, I get disappointed, because I see a tendency to then turn one's back on that. It pains me. It's like, no, let's nurture this. Let's not treat it as something that should be maybe suppressed, or keep a lid on it, or we don't like to talk about it, or we don't want to dwell there for too long. There's something a little bit self-hating or a little bit snobbish or something about treating that as a place that has to be sequestered or only at certain times, or regulated in these kinds of ways. It's like, we like having the genie, but we want to keep it in the bottle. And we want to keep it on the dresser, and we want to keep it from causing trouble. I just feel like there has to be an honest reckoning with the fact that to embrace what is effectively the dysfunctional, destructive potential of life means that all of the things that have a stake, all of the things that sort of hew to order are going to potentially be troubled and undermined by this.

Yeah, so let it actually have the effects that it implies.

Yeah. I love the opening line of John Ashbery's, the second of the *Three Poems*, "The System": "The system was breaking down." You can stand back, and you can assess that as a fact, and then you kind of get a read and a perspective on what another reality might be like. It's not enough to just take that. It's not just like one of the many fruits to be taken from the tree of knowledge, and then, "oh!" And we feel very pleased with ourselves for having made the insight.

Look at the fruit I got. Now I'm going to go somewhere else.

Yeah, "look, oh!" And I have this fruit now too, the darker fruit, the fruit of foreboding, and now I can have a sibylline aspect to my gaze, towards the horizon. It's not really something that can just be sort of taken and kept in the basket with all the other fruit. It's definitely a rotten fruit. It's rotten and wormy, and eventually it's going to sour all the other fruit, and all the fruit's going to rot.

And you want that to happen.

And you have to be okay with that! You kind of have to be okay with that. You have to see that that's a greater potential, that there's more there than in maintaining the orchard.

The status quo, the profitable, practical, known thing.

And again, I really don't hold it against anybody to find that they have to make certain compromises or certain choices, or that they have to make a living, or that they have to have a job, or that they ought to, or that they want to provide— Nothing against people for making those choices. And I try to understand all the reasons why that would put limits on this other kind of life. But the fact is, it does put limits on this other kind of life.

Yeah, it does. And you'd like to keep falling through these floors, and it would be nice to have people around to do that with.

Yeah, because it's hard, and because it's not a given. In other words, the whole point, the whole reason why you'd be tempted to make good is because there are all these promises there that are somewhat, to a greater or lesser degree, achievable. The promises of stability and the mechanisms of the economy and how goods and services and housing and status are conferred and provided. Whereas when you fall out of that, all of those things are kind of in question, and you have to figure out how to put a life together again. But I will say that I've found that by and large, losers take care of each other, and winners just take. So, I don't know where that goes.