Conversation III

by Pamela Z & Atau Tanaka

AT: I remember, Pamela, the first time I saw you in concert it was the late 80s in San Francisco at Southern Exposure Gallery. And you were playing a big plastic water jug.

PZ: And that plastic water bottle, to me, half of its impact was the visual, not just the fact that it makes a big booming sound. The visual was important because I'm thinking about gesture. I'm thinking about image. And now also I use video a lot in my work. When somebody invites me to come play someplace and they'll ask "Are you planning to use video or not," the first thing I want to know is "how is your video projection system set up?" Because, if there's a screen that's way above my head, then I'm not going to do it. Because I don't want to be in one of those situations where the audience has to choose between looking at the visuals or looking at me. I want one immersive single image, and I want to be floating in this image. So it's best if it's rear projected and the screen comes all the way to the floor.

AT: Sometimes I don't mind having projection on my body as well, even if I cast a shadow.

PZ: Exactly. That's certainly preferable over having it way off to the side or way above your head.

AT: The scale, the dimensions need to make sense.

PZ: It needs to make sense, because I think of it as one image. My physical self and this image that's with me, and I'm working with it as if it's a performer.

AT: Yes, it's a single unified thing. You used the word immersion, and that's quite important for me as well, to feel enveloped in the sound, if that sound's coming from gestures of my body. On that immersion bit, we just created a new lab here at Goldsmiths called SIML, which is an acronym for Sonics Immersive Media Lab. It's a big black box space with video projection floor-to-ceiling on all four walls around. In San Francisco there's a similar facility — you know Naut Humon—

PZ: Yeah Naut Humon. It was Recombinant Media Labs.

AT: And their Cinechamber. He's come out here to consult with us on building our studio.

PZ: Oh is that right? You know, Naut had that facility over on Brannan Street for a long time. That was a really beautiful the way he had it set up there. Those were the days when the video was being played off of disks, and he had this hardware system with ten channels. AT: Oh fantastic!

PZ: Now he's doing it at Gray Area. [Gray Area Foundation for the Arts in San Francisco] Do you know Gray Area?

AT: Yeah, I performed there last year!

PZ: He's doing Recombinant Media Labs there. It's a movable system that's dismountable, so he can put it up in that room and then, for the next event, it's not there.

AT: Have you done a piece for the Cinechamber?

PZ: I did a piece there at Brannan Street in the old building. I remember I saw many pieces there where people simply showed ten copies of the same single channel thing. So, when I went in there, I wanted to make something that was site-specific for this space. I built a piece called Sonic Gestures. It was ten channels of video, and each screen was different. It was an 18-minute thing that could loop. It had four movements. One of them started with handclaps. I had taken high-end HD video with a distant, black, duvateen background so that everything was just floating. The arms and hands were floating on a black background. And every screen was a different handclap –not ten copies of the same handclap. And I slowed it down so that you could see the hands approaching and impacting, and the sound was thunderous, because that room had those sub woofers. So it was like thunder claps. Another movement was my hand gestures with a vocal gesture attached to each. If you looked at the long end of the room, the video was crossing all three screens so that you had a 36-foot long arm.

AT: Oh wow! That's the body! The human body larger than life - that's scaled!

PZ: Exactly. And I created it for that situation where people were immersed in 360° of image so they had that feeling of human gesture surrounding them. That was really fun to do.

AT: What's interesting, moving on to talking about the body is, we as performers perform with real bodies, but then, in your Sonic Gestures piece, there's a representation and an expansion and an amplification of scale of the body. In your case it was your own body. You were the performer.

PZ: Yeah, but then I expanded that too. When I made Sonic Gestures, the event started with me doing an 18-minute live performance within the installation. So I was in the center and it was all around me with the audience also inside. But then it could play on a loop, after that, without me performing.

A few years ago, I made a piece called Memory Trace, and I actually had some other pieces before that where I had multiple bodies on stage with me, but they

were all projected while I was live. I have screens that are doorway-sized —sort of human scale– so that you have the full stature of people placed at different levels on stage. So you have an ensemble.

I did a piece years ago [Voci, 2003] where there were three screens and me performing live. In one section, I had four opera arias being sung simultaneously by four different singers, one of which was me. I really like that idea of these multiple performers, some of whom are "virtual" and some who are actually live.

Another thing I like to do in my work is to use speech fragments. I interview people and take the audio of their speech and chop it up to make text collages that become kind of an armature for the live performance, using fragments – from entire sentences to just a single word or syllable or even phonemes to build the music. So when I made Memory Trace a couple of years ago I wanted to carry that into video. So I asked a lot of different people to come to a video shoot. I had them all wearing black against a white background. I asked them questions and I asked them to just give me lists about memory or recite a dream they could remember – things like that. I started editing the video interviews and cutting them the way I do with audio. And, in the live performance, I used their bodies and their voices combined with me performing live. That was a whole other way of dealing with embodiment combining my actual present body with these other people.

AT: So in that case you need a one-to-one scale so the virtual bodies on the screen will be on the same scale as your real body.

PZ: And my screens were like 7' x 3' so it's as if the person is just standing there.

AT: Whereas the one where you're focusing on your arm is like 36 feet (12 meters). Meanwhile video of a live performer is used in a big rock 'n' roll arena or coliseum shows, because it's far away the performers are so tiny that you have to watch them on a TV screen to actually see them up close.

PZ: But that's always been ironic to me that these people are paying $250 or something to get a ticket to see the star they like. And they're just watching them on a very big TV with probably not as good of quality and resolution as they would've had if they had just stayed home and watched it on HBO.

AT: But there are subtle differences because obviously that's TV and it may take away from the true liveness and authenticity of the stage performance. At the same time, for us as experimental musicians and artists, we're working with these very same media and playing with scale…

PZ: And the idea that it's the presence – the human presence, because that performer is there. But, for someone in the nosebleed seats, he or she is a dot on the stage and then they have this gigantic representation. And there's probably somebody with a handheld – probably three or four different cameras and somebody's probably mixing it live…

AT: …so there's a whole TV production going on.

I have a story about liveness and the body and performance. Around the same time that I saw your piece with the water jug at Southern Exposure - this is when I was studying at Stanford at CCRMA - I heard a CD compilation of computer music and there was a piece by Michel Waisvisz, who was the director of STEIM for a number of years: and his instrument, The Hands. The album was all a compilation of different composers of computer music and tape music of the day… until Michel's piece came on. It was a very early version of The Hands in the late 80s where he was controlling a Yamaha TX-816 - a bank of DX7s - from his arm movements. But this was a CD so I didn't have a video, I couldn't see. There was maybe one photograph in the sleeve notes of the album, but by listening to the music it just sounded so visceral and so gestural. There were sounds that were swooping and crashing in a way that was just very different from the studio composed music.

PZ: So you and I both use these instruments that allow us to control parameters of audio and even image or whatever we want to control using physical gestures. And I'm often asked, "when you're recording work in your studio, do you still use a gesture controller or do you just use a keyboard controller since nobody's watching anyway?" And my answer is a complex one, because it depends on what I'm trying to do. If I'm playing samples, and I'm doing this [making gestures], I will get a different performance of those samples with a gesture then I will pushing a button or turning a knob or clicking something. It depends, if I just want to hear that sample play from the beginning to the end, at a particular spot in the recording, I don't even use a controller at all, I just pick that sample up and drop it into ProTools right where I want it. But, if I want to get the nuance of the attack and repetition and doubling and so on, sometimes these happy accidents – things you didn't even plan on – are much more likely to occur when you use a very physical way of manipulating things.

AT: I agree totally. Once a piece is done and I'm performing it from, for example, the Biomuse, I will always perform if from that whether I'm in the studio or when practicing at home or on stage. But it is the context that does change. So if I'm just practicing at home I'm not going to put all my blood, sweat and tears into it,

but if I'm on stage it'll feel more natural to get into it. Now, in doing a studio recording of a gestural piece of music, it's hard because you don't have the audience to pump you up.

PZ: Yeah there's a certain feedback that you get even if it's just the energy in the air.

AT: Yes, the excitement of live performance. To try to replicate that in the studio is…it is a studio recording so I don't need to replicate it totally.

PZ: I don't know if you do this but, when I record works from my live repertoire, I deliberately create new things: new sounds, new textures that I add to the studio version, because a character is missing. Because, in the live performance, people have the visual of me. And that's a pretty substantial layer of how they're experiencing the piece. So, if I just make the exact same sound that you would hear when I performed a piece live, but you don't get to see me doing it, it will seem as though something is missing.

So I tend to do arrangements in which I add a new layer. But then what happens is that, when the recorded version is done, I fall in love with the recording. And then I start thinking, "well how could I add that part when I'm performing it live?"

So I'll give you an example. I have a piece called Flare Stains. It's kind of a sound poem in which I'm describing the wax residue that gets left on the pavement from emergency flares. When I perform the piece live, I loop and layer my own voice. I also use tuning forks, and I start the piece by hitting these tuning forks together and actually touching the vocal microphone with them. And that goes into the texture of the loops. And then I'm singing and there's one point where I start crackling bubble wrap and that gets into the texture as well. So, I'm recording an album of some of my solo works. And I decided that Flare Stains should be on it. I thought this would be so easy because I can just make one pass for each of the things that I usually loop, and just create the loops in Pro Tools. And then I'll sing the melodic line over the top and add my text. And, as I'm working on it, I wonder how to best record these tuning forks. In live performance I just hold them against the microphone or the mic stand. And it's different every time, because sometimes the venue provides me with a mic stand that's plastic and not very resonant, and other times it's very resonant. The audience gets to see me making those tuning fork sounds, so it's OK if they're really faint after they become part of the texture. But when I'm in the studio I'm thinking, "how do I record these tuning forks just so?" I must've spent half a day trying the sound out on a wooden chair, or "what about on this stool?" So I'm pulling different objects into my little isolation booth and isolating each resonant tuning fork sound, and then manipulating it in ProTools. In performance I usually run it through my loops and put a little granular synthesis on it. But, in the studio, I thought "what if I boost the level and make it much louder, or what if I reverse the sounds so that I get reversed attacks?" So I wound up with a very complex layer of tuning fork sounds which are much more prominent than they are in the live version of the piece. No one will get to see the tuning forks, but they'll hear a much more manipulated and substantial sound from them.

AT: So the perennial question is: Is the recording a reflection of the live performance, or does the studio production become so advanced that we're wanting to perform the recording?

PZ: Exactly, that happens to me a lot. The piece with the bottle that you were talking about, for example, involves muttering. I frequently get asked how much improvisation is involved in the work. And I always tell people that these pieces are mainly through-composed and, if you see me do it from one performance to another, you'll recognize that it's the same piece. It has a structure, but there are improvisational elements that are built into that structure. And, in that particular piece, in one section, I hit the bottle, I capture the bottle sounds in three different delay lines that are all at different tempi so that you have out-of-phase loops of this bass drum-like sound. And then I'm singing the melody over that and, while I do that, I always manipulate the bottle in a circular motion, because that's part of the score, so to speak. Then when I get finished with that first verse I go into a section where I'm muttering. Kind of non-language, but language-y. That happens for a specific period of time, but it's not prescribed exactly what the muttering is. I do a sort of made-up language, as if I'm talking. For years I did that piece live, and then I recorded it in the studio. It's the first track on my record A Delay is Better. Then I got to where I learned the muttering as it is on the record. Now, when I perform it live I can't help myself, I have to do the muttering the same way that it is on the recording.

AT: We've both just been performing so long we're ready to make our own Las Vegas acts!

PZ! Exactly! You know it's like the rock guitarist who has the guitar solo, then the record comes out, then everyone memorizes the guitar solo, so now, when they tour the song, he has to play the guitar solo the way it was on the record.

AT: What's interesting is, despite that, we can still get sort of a spontaneous energy into the performance.

PZ: …because you're in the moment and you're physically performing it, you're being moved by whatever emotional

feedback you're getting from the audience and adding your own mood based on how you're feeling that day. Sometimes that muttering becomes a little love letter to somebody, sometimes I'm lecturing angrily at somebody… it changes from performance to performance.

AT: For me that's the kind of total immersive concert situation, whether we're using video or not. It's the feedback or energy or intensity.

Pamela Z is a composer, performer, and media artist who works primarily with voice, live electronic processing, sampled sound, and video. She is the recipient of many honors and awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and an Ars Electronica honorable mention. She will be a keynote presenter for NIME (New Interfaces of Musical Expression) in 2018. www.pamelaz.com

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Artist Statements III

The Body in Sound

by Joanne Armitage

Sound is grounded in the body. It is a corporeal form in its conception, production and reception. Instigated by a kinaesthetic motion, a physical movement of an object in space—a step, a tap, a stroke, a speaker. Sound moves through space as vibration. Sound is actuated and propagated through materials; through objects, air and you. It enters you and is interpreted by you. Whilst complex mechanisms in the ear allow you to hear sound, your body feels it. Your body mediates your experience of sound. We interact with sound, it embeds within us and is sculpted by our physicality as we form it. Sound is physical, it is formed and received as vibration. When the physical sensations of sound go unnoticed they are still embedded within us. Through sound we place and displace ourselves. Music is said to impart a visceral impression upon the body, the emotional impact of this experience is a psychophysical response, but the physical is inherent, integral and absorbed. In her thesis on improvisation and feminism, Smith echoes the above by conceptualising the touch of sound on the body—highlighting its invisibility and its convergent and melding quality.

> Sound writes upon the exterior surfaces and interior substances of the body with an invisible ink that leaves its mark as it evaporates and disappears. The invisible presence of sound complicates the visual basis of intelligibility to underscore the corporeal as an improvisational process of sounding, audition, (re)writing, and transformation [1].

Performative practices involve affective interactions between bodies—of human actors, sonic gestures and architectural spaces. There is a (feminist) shift towards an embodied narrative in sound scholarship that relocates the 'understanding' of performative moments from sonic materialities to a lived, subjective experience [2]. Our participation within sound is not bounded by the flesh, it is both interior and exterior. McCullen [3] discusses how Trombonist Abbie Connant was removed from her position as solo trombonist in the Munich Orchestra as she was considered to 'not possess the necessary physical strength to be a leader of the trombone section.' Her body was scrutinised in the context of her sound, despite it being medically confirmed that she had above-average lung capacity. Connant was forced to engage further with her sensuous body and dealt with the stress and trauma of her situation using corporeal practices. Our bodies occupying spaces in hegemonic structures whether it be