"a special kind of privacy": An Interview with Marek Poliks

Thomas Weideman

I first encountered Marek Poliks' music through the Manchester-based Distractfold Ensemble's website. There's a video of them performing his piece "hull not continent." It's a weird and somehow deeply satisfying piece for amplified quintet made up of long, sustained, almost peripheral sounds in a wide open space: there are faint high-register parts played with great care and control by the instrumentalists, offset by some pointedly gritty and harsh textures, along with extremely low, intermittent, enveloping sub-bass tones. The room where the performance is happening is dark apart from small lights partly illuminating the players and allowing them to read from their scores. But the relative anonymity of this setup belies the physical, tactile quality of this music. It's very much music to be played *and heard in an immediate way rather than something abstract or "pure" to be analyzed from a remove. Since hearing "hull not continent" I've taken to downloading recordings of Poliks' music and listening to them in bed on headphones. I've also read some of his online articles and statements about new music, which demonstrate a self-consciousness and frankness that is uncharacteristic of most writing by composers. I spoke to Poliks about his thinking about music and his recent turn to installation projects.*

Thomas Weideman: Something I admire in your writing is how you discuss new music, or contemporary classical music, as a genre and an economy rather than as some sort of transcendent and inherently more artistic space "beyond" other music. There's a tacit exceptionalism underlying a great deal of discourse around new music, a holdover from an earlier time, and your writing is refreshingly free of it. You've discussed working conditions for performers and composers. You've also written about the anti-corporeal, ostensibly neutral discourse of "listening" and "for-what-to-listen" in this music, and of the discrimination and elitism it often entails.

In your compositions, I sense the same desire to undo oppressive thinking and assumptions within this musical genre. This approach isn't indicated by any programmatic content but is felt at a more immediate level. The sound of your music is unfamiliar, almost alien, but it creates a space I find inviting and absorbing—it's a different kind of music to listen to and perhaps to play. Is it fair to say that your approach to composition is informed by social critique?

Marek Poliks: I'm thankful to be associated with all of the viewpoints you list. (Especially with this kind of "warm alienness," which is exactly the affect I'm trying to work with.)

The bit about exceptionalism rings really true for me. Making music is a job, it's no more or less significant or political or special than any other job. The same goes with the artworld generally. Like

any other relationship to one's job, there can be tensions among personal ethics, coworkers, community values, etc.

I don't think that my work, nor any work as contained and defined by artworld gentrification as mine, can really be considered a critical social practice. I'd go so far as to say that the best critical position this kind of institutional art can take is "against" politics. In doing so, it affirms its status as a job, a career path, a compromised social class, a part of the culture industry, and not (as you note in your question) a transcendental world-historical agent.

I think most of the "critical" work I'm interested in tries to accomplish that shift—from high art to music business—in an attempt to draw my community's focus toward its labor practices, its target audience, its internal demographics, and its financial superstructure. That's happening, for me, on Facebook, or in various articles, or in variously public conversations. But burying that discourse "inside" my music totally defeats the purpose: if I think of what I do as a product, which I do, it's already complicated by the economics I'm trying to critique. I hate satire. For the time being, I'm just focused on sourcing ethical materials for my stuff.

Along those lines, though, the composer Jennifer Walshe has given me an amazing but hard-to-follow maxim: "don't point out your privilege and then continue to enjoy it." This goes both for the artworld's capacity for critique and for my own (as a person who can afford to be an artist, and as a white male person within the artworld itself). I think this recommends some serious "shutting up," especially in the interest of promoting diversity among those who are speaking.

TW: Can you say more about trying to source ethical materials?

MP: I try to examine the relative cultural and political histories of my materials and the world in which my work operates. I'm still wondering what the affirmative side of those ethics might be—maybe something to do with utility and "homemadeness."

My partner (a super amazing fiction writer named Kat Lamp)—her political philosophy is a succinct "don't be an asshole." I think there's something to be said for negative politics, or a negative ethics of appropriation. It's not about avoidance, it's just about taking care. Here again: "shutting up." It's good to shut up; I should shut up more. My work shuts up better when its materials aren't already and intentionally politicized.

TW: Your "Against Listening" statement criticizes music that treats performers as "disembodied emissaries" and suggests a different approach. You write about replacing the score "with a social contract informed by, and flexible to, the consent of the bodies implicated." How does this work?

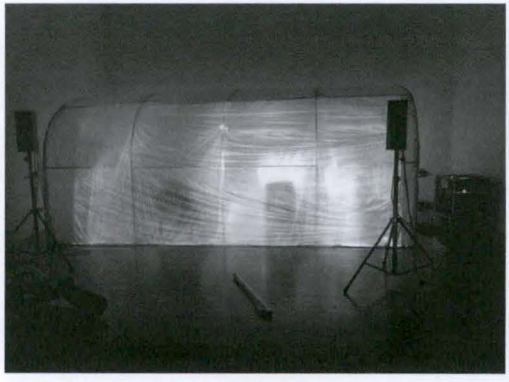
MP: Alex Temple, another composer, wrote an article for this new music online publication (NewMusicBox) called "Composers, Performers, and Consent." The article underlines something really important: that the discourse of performer-composer relations has to recognize/talk about/enumerate/celebrate the agencies specific to performance. One should do so without placing these agencies against those of composition.

That being said, I don't think I'm even interested in a new music artworld of discrete instrumentalities and relational categories. When I was at the Darmstadt Ferienkurse in 2014, I saw a performer-composer project by an artist named Marcela Lucatelli. She danced, interacted with props, and made sounds between two projected videos and amid some prerecorded sound. It wasn't interdisciplinary—it was already "after" disciplinarity. The piece felt "composed," but the context of composedness felt so strange. It was a world and it was being inhabited. It had no discernible politics or even discernible discursivity of any kind—it was a hologram. It was the Marcela Lucatelli Experience.

I've learned a lot from Kanye West (maybe the most important aesthetic theorist of the 21st century so far?). He did this amazing live show at the BRIT awards in 2015, performing his piece "All Day" with like, I don't know, two hundred people on stage, all crowded together. Every few measures a flamethrower spits into the air. It's not a collective, or a mob, in the old ways. You get the sense, via maybe *Wizard of Oz*, that this group of people *is* the Kanye West Experience. Kanye would probably argue that design has replaced art, brand identity has replaced cult of personality, and the "team" has replaced the artist. The "brand" is an organizing principle of a team; it keeps its eye on its outsides. The outside is important—moreso, *an* outside, a communicational outside—an outside grounds the brand, and thus the team, in sociality. (And, like I said earlier, this outside already grounds a project in its demographic practice, its class status, its labor conditions, etc.) So, I believe in teams, teams of designers with different skills, teams who are interested in building something communicational. Teams who appear together. I'm still trying to understand how to organize a team in a functionally postmodern way. I believe in thoughtful administration; I think it's a huge part of whatever "composition" means today.

TW: You worked with a group of people on your recent piece "maw," which was just premiered at the Bludenzer Tage zeitgemäßer Musik. Tell me more about it?

MP: Check it out for yourself: vimeo.com/147209979. Maybe listen first and then we can talk about it?



TW: This is gorgeous. Were you working with the performers for a long time leading up to this? How much did they inform the score?

MP: Hey, thanks. We changed the score a lot! Scores are just there to prime the situation, to get things started. From there (which I mean, was still hundreds of hours of legwork) we spent about 40-50 hours in rehearsal, in a single week in Basel. I don't think we spent any of

that time reproducing anything—it was a constant recursive stream of propositions and refinements, different modes of co-building happening all at once. It was very casual.

TW: Was any of the footage of the performers / the inside projected live?

MP: No, the inside is totally inaccessible to the audience; the critique I've heard of the piece most often centers around that visual inaccessibility. I think that's a very "new music" reaction, to be honest—people want to see some sort of specifically embodied musicality, or they want to understand the chain of sound production. I really value feelings of safety and interiority, and I think that the band (Brian, Felix, Christian, and Eva) constructed a rich interior space.

The video is the dress rehearsal (I wanted their concert performance to be "unaudited"), and you can see visual cues of this interiority here (Felix waving his hands in response to the computer-produced tonal chimes, Brian at the end egging Eva on, etc.). I was told during the concert they were joking around, flipping each other off. I love that. I think you can hear that. I think this is a way to incompletely experience a special kind of privacy—these group dynamics, the instantiation of a private place and its subsequent practice.

TW: To me the critique that hinges on the visual inaccessibility of the performance is closed-minded. When you say it's a very "new music" reaction, is that because of the way visible "embodiment" has come to be privileged in new music? Or is the critique coming from a more general, old-school, classical concert-going place?

MP: All I care about is embodiment—I'm just not interested in practices that try and physicalize new music discourse, nor am I really interested in reproducing specific discourses of embodiment. I'm not a fan of the "athletic" turn in new music, nor am I a fan of this kind of panoptic obsession with live-video overlays of performance.

Maybe I'm just speaking as an anxious person, but I only begin to feel affirmatively "in" my body when I feel safe. As an audience member, I like agency over my body. I'd like an ambulatory body: a body than can exit or cough or get more comfortable. That's why I'm trying to move into the gallery or the "venue." Were I a performer, I'd favor a translucent wall, a performance situation that allows for a partial (even just potential) invisibility of error, in which I can actually leverage my focus on the sounds I'm making over my fear of getting lost.

TW: In my experience, enjoying music necessarily involves the feelings of safety and interiority you've brought up. I'm often more receptive to recordings, music heard in private (or even on earbuds while

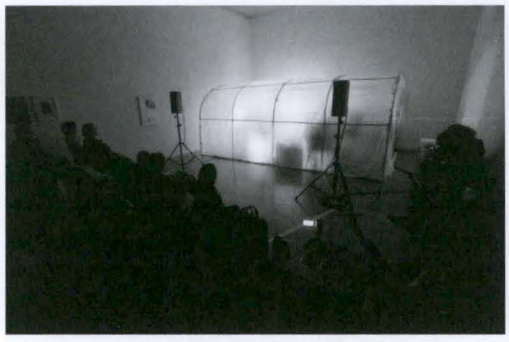
walking) than I am to public performances of music, except when they're happening in a space or working to create a space that's especially conducive to such feelings.

MP: Agency is huge! Some people enjoy situations in which they consensually relinquish a lot of their physical agency—that's super legit, but I personally don't feel that way.

TW: Have any writers or theorists especially influenced your thinking about agency?

MP: I stopped reading theory about a year ago, but I was interested (and still am, but more passively) in the recent intersections of critical/cultural theory and ecology (Jane Bennett, Stacy Alaimo, Bruno Latour) especially in connections to feminism and materialism (like Karen Barad and Elizabeth Grosz, for example). This is all very agent/agency-forward theory, but all of it at the same time is very critical of subjectivity (as a way of categorizing or housing agencies). There are two patterns converging here—the feminist critique of the subject (people like Luce Irigaray), and the ecological/object-oriented critique of the subject (maybe Latour the present standard-bearer, with Deleuze or Whitehead being the classic touchstones).

I think I'm personally very critical of subjectivity (especially in relation to, like, "art"), but I wouldn't call my music polemical. I think there's some post-anthropocene apocalypticism close to the surface there (where are the people?), but it's kept in check with just a little bit of escapism.



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TW: Could you say more about being critical of subjectivity in relation to art?

MP: I'm not into art, I'm not into authenticity, and I'm not into contexts that deny performativity or performance. We are always performing, always in quantum flux between subject-positions and identities. A subjectivity expressible in a contained singularity is historically the province of white masculinity. Toss it.

TW: What do you mean by post-anthropocene apocalypticism "kept in check with just a little bit of escapism"?

MP: For me, so much (if not all) of contemporary artwork is (definitionally) about intentionalizing a space, creating a dialogue between the space and its conceptual or historical or just otherwise aestheticizing frame. This is what I mean when I say I am "over" art—I'm over that necessary distance between the intentionalizing force and the space. I'm over irony and I'm over gaze and I'm over critical contexts and politicization and cultural commentary, etc., etc. When I say escapism—I literally mean trashy 90s' *Star Wars* novels; I *mean* entertainment. "Escapism" means that the apocalypticism

or the alien or the post-anthropocene in my project isn't rigorous, isn't taken too seriously, or vectored with some kind of warning, or even with any kind of positive or negative valuation. It's a movie with no message, a place to go that sounds cool, that sounds a certain way, that has that boring but real function of making you feel comfortable and warm.

TW: How did you arrive at the approach taken up in "maw" (this "instantiation of a private place and its subsequent practice")?

MP: Spaceships! That's my thing. Spaceships are all about enclosure/exclosure, void, aliens/others, hiddenness/discovery. I'm not a video game guy, but literally all of my pieces since 2012 are about this Nintendo GameCube game called *Metroid Prime*. This game is amazing—you are really, "already," on an alien world, but something about this amazing system of slightly porous enclosures around you (around the body of the player character, around the rooms in each overlay of the world, around each region, etc.) makes you feel so at peace. Discovery remains your object. Warmth/peace and discovery are the affects I'm going for, the spaceship is the model, and the private place and its inhabitance is the praxis.

TW: Do you plan to work with these kinds of spaceship installations more in the future?

MP: I think I'm going to stick with spaceships for a long time. I have plans to use this concept for all my future projects until, like, 2019—that feels pretty permanent to me. For the next project I'm building one out of tubes, then one out of plastic and cables with pulleys and motors, and then a very big piece where the installation will be built from metal. Again, central to all of this are concepts of private space, portals and interiors, safety and warmth.

TW: How would you say the experience of putting "maw" together changed your relationship to your work?

MP: "maw" messed me up! I can't write concert music anymore; that whole eight-or-so-year phase of my life is just gone. Now every piece has to be a world—like, it can't just represent a world; my audience has to be mobile and exploring a physical space. In the last few weeks my forthcoming projects have swelled tremendously in these directions—from just little houses for performers to entire desert rooms complete with plants and rocks to weird shadowy craneyards.

I feel like I'm moving in the direction of sound art, but without the conceptualism incurred by what the word "art" means in 2016. Sound design for imaginary spaces? Landscape architecture of early 2000s' video games? I'm intimidated by the lack of infrastructure available for these kinds of projects (at least within the new music community), but I'm also feeling pretty emboldened by how unpopulated this particular creative space seems. ‡