Flatness and Non-Immersion

by
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Abstract

Real and virtual experience combine to produce personal narratives. Personal narratives move through spaces and bodies. *Flatness*, a devised spoken-word piece with electronic soundscape accompaniment, saw its performer/devisers, Matt Horrigan and Julia Siedlanowska, break accounts of their homes and selves into scattered anecdotes, creating a non-teleological storytelling structure which greeted its audience as a performance installation. A diary of moments, an exploration of generative media, and a farewell to fantasy videogamescapes, *Flatness* attempted to create a world of meaningful objects that refused co-operation with perspective, aiming instead to function as a voluntarily-explored, non-immersive, medium.

**Keywords**: soundscape; electroacoustic; acousmatic; spoken-word; anecdote; devising
Dedicated to the defunct Republic Commando multiplayer clans – real names remaining masked, player names remaining inscrutable.
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# Table of Contents

Approval .......................................................................................................................... ii
Abstract ............................................................................................................................ iii
Dedication .......................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ v
Table of Contents ........................................................................................................... vi
List of Figures ................................................................................................................... vii
List of Acronyms ............................................................................................................. viii
Glossary ............................................................................................................................. viii
Introductory Image ........................................................................................................ ix

1. Flatness and Non-Immersion ...................................................................................... 1
   1.1. Impetus .................................................................................................................. 1
   1.2. Conceptual Framework ....................................................................................... 2
       1.2.1. Through Time ............................................................................................... 2
       1.2.2. In Space ....................................................................................................... 4
   1.3. Devising Process ................................................................................................. 6
   1.4. Performance Event .............................................................................................. 10
   1.5. References ......................................................................................................... 13

2. Supplemental - Framing Music Conceptually: Manipulating Intuitions,
   Enclosing Habits, Curating Influences ................................................................. 16
   §1 - Manipulating Intuitions .................................................................................... 16
   §2 - Enclosing Habits ............................................................................................... 20
   §3 - Curating Influences .......................................................................................... 26
Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 32

Appendix A. Flatness Audio Recording ................................................................. 34
List of Figures

Figure 1: Poster ........................................................................................................ ix
Figure 2: Performance Space ...................................................................................... 9
Figure 3: Audience Seating ....................................................................................... 11
List of Acronyms

MMORPG  Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game

OpenGL  Open Graphics Language, a software library used by graphics programmers to specify the processes necessary to render 3D color objects onscreen.¹

Glossary

Open World  A videogame genre designed such that players can choose courses of action not plotted out by designers.²

Sandbox Game  A style of videogame that allows players to "roam and change a virtual world at will."³

Sidescroller  A videogame in which players view the action from a side angle, with characters moving from left to right on the screen.⁴

First-Person Shooter  A videogame which immerses a player in a 3D world, where they see through the eyes of their character and move about shooting opponents.⁵

Figure 1: Poster
The poster for Flatness, performed Thursday August 25th and Friday August 26th at the Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, Vancouver. Poster designed by the author.
1. Flatness and Non-Immersion

1.1. Impetus

I have moved homes frequently during the past two years. During my undergraduate studies I migrated seasonally, living in Montreal for the eight months of the academic year and in Ottawa for the summer. After I moved to Vancouver, true nomadism set in.

My first tastes of displacement had come before, though, as an adolescent, in the environments of the videogames *Neverwinter Nights*, *Republic Commando*, *Star Wars Battlefront*, *Medal of Honor*, and the game franchises of the first two *Harry Potter* stories. Later, during the second year of my undergrad, I developed an on-and-off harmfully-overblown infatuation with *Minecraft*, which resurfaced one last time to dominate the three weeks leading up to my graduation in May 2014. Since then I have not played the game again; however, I have revisited it mentally, imagining myself among its voxellated forests and deserts. The one videogame in which I have since invested time - between five and seven hours - has been *In a Dark Room*, a text-based work that plays on its users’ reticence to imagine inhabiting alternative bodies.

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2 *Star Wars Republic Commando*, computer software (San Rafael, CA: LucasArts, 2005).
3 See *Star Wars: Battlefront*, computer software (San Rafael: LucasArts, 2004); *Star Wars Battlefront II*, computer software (San Francisco, CA: LucasArts, 2005).
5 See *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, computer software (Redwood City, CA: Electronic Arts, 2001); *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, computer software (Redwood City, CA: Electronic Arts, 2002).
6 *Minecraft*, computer software (Stockholm, Sweden: Mojang, 2009).
As I drift in reality away from my original home region, I experience similar affects in regard to the videogame places and physical places I have inhabited. My dreams catalogue them together as ‘homes’. I wanted to record them in a way that drew upon my artistic training - to compose a sonic analog for artworks such as Alex Morrison’s *Every House I Have Ever Lived In, Drawn from Memory*. I would describe, document, take control of representation, and thereby reduce nostalgic sentiments by ‘ruining the magic.’ By the end of the project, playing *Minecraft* would hold no further appeal.

1.2. Conceptual Framework

1.2.1. Through Time

*Flatness* resists the pervasive narrative conventions of myths, videogames, big-budget movies and the lower-budget art forms that imitate them. No story arc emerges from the text, as would occur in a fantasy novel; no vocal contour ramps up tension during the performance, as would occur in a poetry slam; no through-lines connect each anecdote to the next, as would occur in a biography. In planning *Flatness* I tried to avoid narrative tropes that would shoehorn it – an academic artwork - into a style of commercial media.

I responded to the potential for undesired teleological obligation by anchoring my storytellings in fragmented ecosystems - objects - and not to unifying plot. I created conditions for syncretic, disfluent recountal, in the hopes that the resulting utterances would fail to instantiate interpellating clichés. By issuing fragments without placing them in a hierarchy, I assembled a complex of information bearing few mnemonic aides. The resulting details are not efficiently useful. As the performance brought experiences of place and body into discourse, it undermined their ability to coalesce into a total.

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8 *Every House I Have Every Lived In, Drawn from Memory*, Alex Morrison, felt-tip pen on wall (1998-)

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Treated as a work of temporal art, *Flatness* thus joins musical compositions like “Snagglepuss,” from John Zorn’s *Naked City*, in exemplifying the postmodern version of what Karlheinz Stockhausen called “momentform.” Jonathan Kramer defines the ‘moments’ in ‘moment form’ as “self-contained entities, capable of standing on their own yet in some sense belonging to the context of the composition.” In Kramer’s cursory account of Western classical music history, discontinuity supplants continuity as a default state following the so-called ‘crisis’ of the early-twentieth-century that saw high-classical tonality cease to exercise hegemony over musical composition. Modernist composers struggled to contrive new ways of holding their compositions together, and postmodern compositions particulated into arbitrary moments instead of coalescing into wholes. Moment form influences modern pop songs, where verses and choruses often follow similar-but-disjunct harmonic and textural formulae. Moment form also lends itself relatively easily to generative music (and particularly to real-time music-generation) by sidestepping the need for complicated rules determining overarching structure. Moments may occur in arbitrary order or proportion.

Moment form traditionally rejects goal-orientation; however, each of the moments in *Flatness*, like the stylistically-partitioned sections in Zorn’s work, arcs through a teleology, the text establishing setting and characters, and the electronic soundscape establishing form-bearing dimensions together with some developmental trajectory, cycle or ecology. Unlike much of Zorn’s music - the rest of *Naked City*, for example - *Flatness*’s soundscape never reiterates moments it has departed. Its soundscape exists as a through-composed sequence of generative modules, each serving as backdrop for spoken English-language narration.

Since it emerges from its authors’ experiences, the text of that narration involves a few overall unifying details, because certain objects (e.g. zombies, dogs, and forest

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9 John Zorn et al., *Naked City*, Elektra Nonesuch, 1990, CD.
biomes) do the same things in different anecdotes (e.g. menace, confound, and be destroyed, respectively). The theme of ‘body’ occurs in conjunction with the real narrator ‘Julia,’ and the theme of ‘place’ occurs in conjunction with the real narrator ‘Matt.’ However, the sequence of narratives does not reinforce long-term expectations. It has ‘no end in sight,’ until it ends. I had to announce that the performance was over in order for the audience to hail it as such.

1.2.2. In Space

Sound designers for theatrical productions use the word ‘underscore’ to refer to audio playback that continues ambiently throughout a scene. From a typographical perspective my project sounds very flat indeed, featuring as it does 102 underscores, most eliding into the next. Composer Matthew Ricketts, describing his orchestral work Flat Line,\(^\text{13}\) suggests that his title functioned both to describe the contour of the piece’s melodies and to suggest a meditation on death. In psychopathology, flatness is supposed to be where affect dries up. In all its fields, the word ‘flat’ suggests a negative space beside relatively memorable topographies, like ‘letters’ or ‘life’.

The word figures prominently in visual artspeak. From Clement Greenberg’s rejection of literary influence\(^\text{14}\) to the frictionless canvases adorning Mark Rothko’s chapel,\(^\text{15}\) we can observe a trajectory toward instantaneous viewing, a landscape whose presentation to eyes changes little depending on direction or position of looking. In modernist painting, narrative and perspective go out of style. With narrative goes temporality, and the kind of accessibility Michael Fried called literalist “presence.”\(^\text{16}\) In formalist work, whatever appears appears in a medium designed for some senses and not others; an ideal, always existing alongside irrelevant details (e.g. the white paint on the


\(^{15}\) Rothko Chapel, building (Houston, Texas: 1409 Sul Ross Ave.).

gallery wall). ‘The viewer’ is not supposed to be able to apply all of her experience to the understanding of a modernist work. Modernist interpretation requires limited perspective.

Flatness and perspective do not simply oppose each other. Edwin Abbot Abbot’s 1884 novel *Flatland*\(^\text{17}\) describes a world of vertices and edges discussable in the jargon of today’s OpenGL graphics programmers, where flat entities interact according to physics familiar from sidescroller-shooter videogame environments, and where smoother shapes (‘high-poly models,’ as it were) possess greater social status. Nick Sousanis’s comic-book doctoral thesis *Unflattening*\(^\text{18}\) uses visual perspective as a metaphor for knowledge production, suggesting that revelations emerge from triangulation between different points of view (e.g. from multiple eyes, from multiple senses, from multiple religions - the more the better). “Unflattening” therefore refers to progress (albeit toward understanding a universe Sousanis describes as “rhizomatic,” in a terminological, if not wholly conceptual, nod to Deleuze and Guattari).\(^\text{19}\) Complementarily, Manuel DeLanda’s term “flat ontology” denotes an opposite to hierarchy: “singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status.”\(^\text{20}\) In applied mathematics there exists no single measure of flatness, since unflatness might manifest, among other things, as concentrated protrusion (e.g. mountains) or distributed roughness (e.g. gravel).\(^\text{21}\) In perception, roughness of increasingly fine grain reduces individuation - too many condensed points-viewed collect into a single mass-in-view. Too many points of view require metastudy - reduction - to yield useful pieces of data. At another extreme, curvature of global proportion does not readily greet sensibility.

Immersive media envelope as many sensorial perspectives as possible in order to reroute their audiences’ umwelts. They derail, conflict and produce vertigo, or else

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reinforce each other to synthesize logics. Immersion satisfies sensorial desires. By contrast, because you can’t immerse yourself in it, a flat thing seems in a white male Western gaze to require changing, encompassing, framing or replacing - in a word, colonizing. The original Minecraft generative worlds, based on those of its precursor game Infiniminer\textsuperscript{22} and before the coming of caves, mountains and ecological biomes that would transform it during successive development cycles from an open-world sandbox game into an MMORPG, had flat surfaces - only by digging or building could one create interesting features. In contrast, Hollywood flicks supply mnemonic and sentimental apparatuses ‘out of the box’ in the form of template narratives, often modelled on myth-archetypes like the Hero’s Journey.\textsuperscript{23} First-person shooters encourage players to enact such narratives. \textit{Flatness} therefore leverages and strains an audience’s colonial training, because you have to struggle if you want to overview - and thus remember - the narrative delivered. A charitable Brechtian scholar might say that the struggle introduces opportunities for emancipation. I think it at least stresses failure points for replication.

1.3. Devising Process

I sought dramaturgical advice from Kyla Gardiner, who also created \textit{Flatness}’s lighting design. Composer Remy Siu, conversing with me in January before I began the project in earnest, helped focus the subject of the text by indicating that he had strong memories of videogame-mediated social interactions. Both of the above helped me grasp the important role quotidian virtual experience plays in shaping many individuals’ narratives of themselves. I decided to narrate my experience thereof in prose instead of poetry, because I wanted to make it obvious that \textit{Flatness}’s narrative is hard to parse because it rejects long-term structural arcs, not because it breaks grammatical conventions.

I created a 20-minute demo recording of the project in April 2016. The demo featured my voice, alone, close-miked, speaking text in monotone over a soundscape

\textsuperscript{22} Infiniminer, computer software (New York: Zachary Barth, 2009).

whose segmentation loosely paralleled the structure of my spoken anecdotes (the texture changed approximately once for every two switches of story setting). After listening to the demo I made two decisions: (1) that, in performance, I would need a contrasting theme - *Flatness* should feature at least one other voice, and the person providing that voice should also provide the stories they would speak; and (2) that, in the interest of clear structure, textual sections should correspond one-to-one with sound cues. In response to the first point I asked Julia Siedlanowska to join the project as fellow reader and text-deviser. I also took feedback from composer Pierre-Alexandre Tremblay regarding the mix, and decided that I wanted the performers to strive to deliver the text scrutinably at all times. I consequently asked Julia to shout over the soundscape wherever it threatened to drown her out. The soundscape and lightscape, which I eventually considered together as the ‘tech-scape,’ provided a topography about which Julia and I would rove, both in terms of physical place and of speech contour, as we spoke. The topography would sometimes make deciphering the spoken anecdotes (for the audience, when the soundscape was loud) and/or reading the script (for the performers, when the lights were low) difficult, even though the performers prioritized clarity as a task. My performance instructions would exist in tension with my technical constructions, similarly to the way instructions to move objects interact with the physical awkwardnesses of moving those objects in task-oriented dances like Yvonne Rainer’s “Parts of Some Sextets.”

Julia wrote her script in several passes, firstly making one un-edited anecdote per each of mine, then subsequently editing each of her anecdotes according to grammatical criteria I provided. The most explicit of these criteria were: (1) that she should avoid the verbs ‘to be’ and ‘to have’ wherever possible; (2) that she should avoid evaluative statements about her actions or those of other characters she wrote about; and (3) that she should restrict her use of the second-person, in order to blend with my writing style. Julia’s narrative habits nevertheless contain elements that stand out as opposed to mine,

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25 The former avoidance institutes a communication style known in the study of semantics as E-prime. It emphasizes relationships over categories. See D. David Bourland and Paul Dennithorne Johnston, *To Be or Not: An E-prime Anthology* (San Francisco: International Society for General Semantics, 1991). Thanks to Frederick Gietz for pointing it out.
most notably her tendency to switch implied narrators often (she does this during performance, in vocal style, as well). We decided not to censor her changes to implied narrator as much as we did her changes to implied audience.

Where each of my anecdotes centred on a location I had lived in, each of Julia’s centred on a part of her body (her choice of theme). At first I thought to balance my descriptions of virtual-reality spaces by asking Julia to include descriptions of virtual-reality avatars; however, she had never become emotionally invested in a videogames, and therefore had never used any avatars she wanted to write about. It eventually occurred to me that she could write about characters she had played in her acting practice. Thus both of us would describe ‘real’ alongside ‘virtual’ - or vicarious - experiences.

I lack voice-acting training. Consequently, I initially wanted to adopt a vocal style that mimicked the sound of pilots over aircraft radios, calm in all circumstances and requiring effort to parse accurately. I ultimately decided that such an approach flattened the narrative too much to enjoy performing, and that it, in contrast to Julia’s character-swapping, overemphasized the gender division between our two presences - a division already reinforced by the roaming nature of my narrative settings as opposed to the usually-closer-to-home experiences Julia described. I decided to aim for dynamic range in delivery, whatever emotive demonstration that required.

Flatness should be fun for its audience, in part because it offers an opportunity to revel in the effects of random, and therefore unexpected, stimulation. I asked Kyla to design 102 arbitrary lighting looks (plus one especially bright look for house lights) and to arrange them in whatever order she wanted. I would then trigger them from my performance-control software such that each anecdote received its own lighting environment. Lighting shifts reinforced shifts between soundscape/narrative-moments/spaces.
My sound designs included acousmatic gestures, synchronized and unsynchronized loops, generative modules, soundtrack music composed by me and soundtrack music sampled from others. I drew on my own field recordings as well as film FX libraries like Sound Ideas and Apple Loops, supplemented with free online audio databases, principally Freesound.org. In some cases I equalized, compressed and reverberated found sounds so that they resembled commercial productions, and in some cases I used recordings in relatively unmodified states - so that they sounded thin and unclear - or overapplied effects like noise removal so that the soundscapes resembled low-quality .mp3s. To create processing patches for live-rendering, I often worked from template presets bought from Apple or Ableton, but in several cases built my patches ‘from scratch.’ Pursuant to their operation as separate moments, I did not want all of my designs pigeonholed into any one genre.

In performance, Julia and I triggered sound- and light-scapes in sequence according to a convention where one of us would start a cue, then the other would speak an anecdote and wait for as long as desired before triggering a transition to the next cue.
The cue transition signalled to the one of us who had spoken least recently that they could now begin to speak again. Thus each of us controlled how long the soundscape that had just accompanied our speech would persist. Either of us could also trigger a transition between cues before we had finished speaking our current anecdote, thus giving the other permission to speak simultaneously. Because I had composed each sound cue to run indefinitely unless interrupted, the performance instructions did not impose a limit on the amount of time either of us could take up with a given anecdote. In rehearsal we experimented with allowing some soundscapes to stretch on for awkward lengths of time, and with waiting more or less patiently before beginning to speak. We ultimately did not overlap speech in performance, as doing so would have had us contradict our clarity priority in favour of expressive rhythm. Although I prioritized rhythmic and dynamic interest when composing the soundscapes, I considered it a lesser preference for the human performers, whose simple job it was to get our message across despite the tech-scape’s interferences.

1.4. Performance Event

Some audience members would certainly feel bored by the anti-narrative structure of *Flatness*. None of the anecdotes fulfilled expectations established by any preceding, and no part of the performance deviated from the alternating pattern according to which I spoke and pressed the ‘Go’ button, then Julia spoke and pressed the ‘Go’ button, then I did the same, and so forth until the end. To ameliorate the audience’s experience, I decided to leave the doors to the venue open, so that the they could treat the show as an installation, coming and going at will.

Surround-sound loudspeaker arrays necessarily create asymmetry between listening experiences at different audience locations. In response to this perennial problem of acousmatic art, and to afford an audience experience more comfortable than that available in a concert, I scattered chairs throughout the listening area. In my experience, non-proscenium seating coupled with ease of mobility encourages observers to swap positions overtime.
Figure 3: Audience Seating
Audience seating arrangement for Flatness.

Julia or I could, according to my rules, also enter and exit the performance at any point, leaving the soundscape to carry on until we returned to pick up the narrative. (Neither of us did this in performance - it felt wrong.) I positioned our water glasses on a chair apart from our speaking positions, so that we would move when we wanted to drink. Our movement divided the attention of the audience and helped them avoid falling asleep.

I intended Flatness to partially surround its audience, but not to immerse them. Aesthetic discussions of videogame and installation art sometimes valence immersion as a virtue, even to the extent that inducing uncomfortable, involuntary emotions in an audience becomes a serious goal. Audio figures instrumentally in such tasks. Acousmatic and post-acousmatic music, with their focusses on elaborate surround-sound,

immerse listeners in alternative worlds without recourse to visual stimulus, projecting “cinema for the ear” and exercising what, in composer/theorist Michel Chion’s words, “can become an insidious means of affective and semantic manipulation.”

Text can contradict cinema, narrative can bifurcate from environment, senses can disagree, and their disagreement presents choice. Agency, the ability to consent, the ability to construct for oneself, emerges where alternatives still appear, where immersion has not consumed its object(ive). By appending arbitrary symbols and sounds to elements of our experience we can outmerse ourselves from sensations, adopting out-of-body attitudes toward them. Projects like the afore-footnoted TVTropes or John Koenig’s Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows give names to magical common phenomena, the former as they occur in storytelling and the latter in depressive emotional states.

The 13th-century nominalist logicians William of Sherwood and Peter of Spain thought that humans could create knowledge not only by changing lexicons, but also by controlling grammar - atoms of logic, pointers to objects, could rearrange in new forms, which could in turn acquire names and become prizes for future lexographers, atomic playthings for future grammarians. Dithering, entropic, memory and its fomentation await resculpting, deliberate or from a perspective that sees no other options. I hope that the new narratives of place and body uttered in Flatness invited audiences out of their canvases for long enough that the painted world seemed less familiar on reentry.

1.5. References


Every House I Have Every Lived In, Drawn from Memory, Alex Morrison, felt-tip pen on wall (1998-)


Zorn, John et al. Naked City, Elektra Nonesuch, 1990, CD.
2. Supplemental - Framing Music Conceptually: Manipulating Intuitions, Enclosing Habits, Curating Influences

(This chapter was first drafted in December 2015, as an articulation of my conceptual thoughts prior to embarking on Flatness.)

§1 - Manipulating Intuitions

By closing my eyes and listening I leave my limbs behind. Ears can provide spatial orientation, and the orientation they build - when concurrent visual input does not project beyond the eyelids - differs from an eyes-and-ears-open-together experience. By presenting manipulated sound in the presence of hearing-ears and closed-eyes, then, I can aid a willing audience in feeling as though their bodies move, while anyone watching those bodies sees them sitting still. The audience could not perform this motion-without-observable-displacement with eyes open.

The concept of perceptual dominance has long relevance in modern psychology, appearing in writing at least as early as Robert Morris Ogden’s 1926 treatise Psychology and Education (226) and subsequently figuring most prominently in the study of vision. The phenomenon works like this: to produce a certain circumstance, one must emphasize certain senses. Visual sense binds location, space and movement together in a way that auditory sense does not. The way one experiences space in a concert with eyes open resembles the way one experiences space in a concert with eyes open and ears plugged. Vision dominates my sense of space (at least relative to audition) until I shut my eyes or deprive them of light. Then, unmasked, my auditory sense plays a greater role in constructing the alternative space that emerges.

Certain media dominate certain cultures the way certain senses dominate certain perceptions. Clement Greenberg claimed that abstract expressionism emancipated painting from literature (563). Literature, so the story goes, had influenced painting so

33 Colativa (1974) brings the topic to prominence.
pervasively that, during the Renaissance, to judge a painting meant to judge the way the painter rendered a scene capturing some characters mid-drama. Ubiquitous narrativity masked the experiences afforded by paint but not by narrative. Eventually avant-garde painters sought painterly analogs for absolute music’s apparent ‘abstract’, form-without-reference property. They authored new paintings under progressively less literary influence, so the era of painting-as-literature-in-a-poorly-suited-medium ended.

In Vancouver in late 2015, ‘visuals’ dominate performance. During past year the popular opera Stickboy and the orchestral song cycle air india [redacted] both staged their human performers under giant video screens. At the 2015 Push festival, the improvising ensemble Eye of Newt (for their piece Hour of the Wolf) and the theatre-oriented interdisciplinary company Hong Kong Exile (for their piece Eating the Game) did the same. Big flat projections appear behind many dance and concert electronic music performances, as composers apply their technical training to video-jockeying. Meanwhile, contemporary tonal concert music mimics film and videogame soundtracks, which reach our ears more often than concerts do. Music’s turn toward screens makes intermediality the order of the day. A reaction, then, seems immanent, and indeed the subjects of artistic purity and autonomy so dear to Greenberg emerge in the words of Brian Ferneyhough. Ferneyhough’s concern applies more widely than to the literal co-presentation of music with other media. Rather, the phenomenon of reference functions in Ferneyhough’s worldview the way perspective functioned in Greenberg’s as a colonial emissary. When music references other things, music-specific features of music become submerged beneath foreign imports, which consist either in the things referenced or in the language of reference itself. Ferneyhough says:

Autonomy is extremely important in the contemporary arts – I know it’s not very fashionable to say that, but it seems to me that simply referring to things and making sort of snide artistic comments in one medium of another is a very cheap way of relating to the world in general. I think we as artists have got to accept that there are certain paths which lead to useful autonomy in a work of art or a linguistic medium which are not amenable to being realised with that sort of simple-minded iconic relationship to external reality. (Archibold, 53)

34 Perspective masks ‘flatness’, the inherent property of a canvas or other painterly medium.
Ferneyhough’s revival of absolute-music ideology seems especially pertinent where composers interact with academia or with governmental granting institutions. In such situations we have to justify our music in writing, whether by applying for grants, marketing ourselves on websites or producing papers and technical riders. Aphoristically, “writing about music is like dancing about architecture”. Words and music can’t represent all the features of each other. We neglect important parts of our music in trying to describe it. And since our acts of description redistribute our own sensibilities, that neglect often causes us to lose parts of our musical practices. Polemically, Arnold Schoenberg summed up the dilemma produced in trying to relate words, even poetically, to musical experience (1950, 2):

the impression of the "essence of the world" received through music becomes productive in him [Wagner, in this case] and stimulates him to a poetic transformation in the material of another art. But the events and feelings which appear in this transformation were not contained in the music, but are merely the material which the poet uses only because so direct, unpolled and pure a mode of expression is denied to poetry, an art still bound to subject-matter.

The argument operates very simply: no other medium can be music, encapsulate music, document music. ‘Pure’ music manifests in (structured) sound, divorced from subject matter. Anything else pollutes. That pollution includes any type of writing used to describe music (i.e music theory) or prescribe music (musical scores). To extrapolate in present-day language, the symbols of writing-about-music, whether prescriptive or descriptive, corral the sensible features of music into what the symbols represent. Traditionally, what a score fails to communicate, a composer fails to communicate, and what a theory paper fails to describe, its author fails to describe. Both practices construct a mediated representation - a translation - of some sensible experience, and the products of both types of translation - scores and theoretical writings - often stand in for their objects - musical experiences - for purposes of evaluation and imitation.

Within academia, few artists have the luxury of practicing art without explaining it. In order to converse between disciplines and with disciplines outside the arts, we need to deal in concepts. There exist many types of concepts, and I prefer to develop my conceptual practice as a music theory practice. Therefore I need to explain how I suppose music theory to relate to music composition, and how I can pursue the two in a concerted
manner. To figure out how one can assemble an art practice and a theory practice, I will here sketch a rough categorization of theoretical practice, starting with the traditional opposition between pulling-apart (analysis) and putting-together (usually called synthesis). Within putting-together I distinguish synthesis and the syncretism: synthesis assembles parts to form a whole, whereas syncretism acknowledges the parts within a whole. Synthesis and syncretism exist in the background of all theory, because one can’t claim to have brought some objects together without acknowledging the difference between them. (Conflation alone does not constitute theory.)

Theory can’t subsist reflexively; it must function non-autonomously, by discussing features of something it does not itself enact. Non-autonomy necessitates sacrifices for the purposes of translation: when one emphasizes some features of an object, one masks other features. Theory, inescapably, both reduces and constructs. It does not keep an entirely open mind. It conceptualizes what it can reference, and omits The Rest.

Art differs from theory in that it does not consist entirely of concepts. Intuition - especially taste - figures in art. ‘What chord would sound good here?’ ‘What colour would look good here?’ ‘What objects would go good together in this space?’ In order to conjoin an art practice with a theory practice I need to consider how concepts can relate to intuitions-that-do-not-become-concepts. How can I synthesize a practice of conceptualization with a practice of intuition? Igor Stravinsky answers by propounding the merits of restriction:

my freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraint, diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one’s self of the chains that shackle the spirit.

To the voice that commands me to create I first respond with fright; then I reassure myself by taking up as weapons those things participating in creation but as yet outside of it; and the arbitrariness of the constraint serves only to obtain precision of execution. (67)

In conceiving restrictions, an artist defines a range for their intuitions. We can also sculpt intuition by practicing taxonomy, thereby founding/extending categorical thought (‘things that sound like this are single notes’; ‘things that sound like this are dominant-seventh
chords’; etc). We might instil habits through technique (i.e ‘make the second-last chord of each composition a dominant seventh chord’, etc). A tradition like musical *Formenlehre* (form-teaching or analysis of form) instils outdated technique, thereby embedding history in intuition. The same goes not only for prescriptive praxes of counterpoint and orchestration but for the reification of canon through syllabus. Prescribing the old creates an intuitive language of listening and creating.

We can practice mimicry. Jazz players develop their individual palette of sounds, their tone-concept, by transcribing - translating into traditional music-notation - the recorded improvisations of musicians they wish to imitate. By studying multiple other players, jazz improvisers develop their lexicon of melodic progressions and accompaniment patterns. The mechanics of recording and transcriptional media obviously influence what one player can learn from others in this way; however, codes mediate all concepts - all ideas mask others.

Generally, we can plan. As we decide whom to study with or imitate, or talk with or present work to, planning inherits concepts and bequeaths *commitments*. Training inhabits continuities - it instils habits that one may invite in when closing off conscious agency and applying intuition. I describe this view of training in more detail below.

§2 - Enclosing Habits

In trying to manipulate intuition by means of concept, I am trying to handle a thing without representing it. I think I can best understand this experience by appealing to an analogous and much more generally-present conversation in current humanities: that on realism and representation. Much recent analytic philosophy variously authenticates, critiques and taxonomizes realism(s),35 and I won’t overlap with that work here. But I will provide an indirect account of a realism as an enclosed space, analogous to the temporal experience of *entrainment*.

35 See Kulvicki (2013), especially pages 111-127, for a substantial layout of discussions on realism and representation.
The word entrainment has several related semantic fields and I focus on the one most related to music. Musical entrainment occurs when two rhythmic activities interact and consequently synchronize (Clayton, 2-3). Although often voluntary, it allows organisms such as humans to participate in synchronous activities proceeding at a rate faster than conscious conceptualization. Since human brains contain no chronological timekeeping mechanism, entrainment instantiates the closest thing to a biological clock with which to track rapid, short-duration events. Entrainment can adapt to changes in tempo, allowing one to, say, dance to a slightly-unsteady drummer. One can also choose which of many simultaneously-presented rhythms to entrain to: I could move slowly to the pulse of the bass drum or rapidly to the pulse of the hi-hat. I could sustain either activity without consciously thinking about it.

The pulses constituting the beat do not all emerge as concepts. One can consciously anticipate any particular pulse of a rhythm to which one has entrained, thereby affording greater scrutiny for the sensorial details of a particular moment (for example the timbre of an individual bass-drum hit), or one can categorize features of the rhythm as a whole (for example by gauging the steadiness of the tempo), but one can’t assess all of any large contiguous set of onrushing events. The experience resembles looking at a forest while riding a train through it: if one wants to examine an individual tree, one can, but only by committing to the pre-planned action of shifting one’s gaze at a pace proportional to that with which the interesting tree crosses the horizon of the window. Prematurely breaking off this shift-of-gaze inheres not seeing any details of the tree. But, during the shift-of-gaze, consciousness cannot control what one scrutinizes: it’s the tree, or else it’s blur (briefly) as one cancels the action.

Rhythmic musical improvisation requires many entrainment actions, each a temporary renunciation of conscious agency. A similar procedure characterizes acts of depiction, for example in figure-drawing. Sketching an object might involve (1) seeing an object, (2) deciding to sketch it, (3) beginning the sketch, (4) sketching according to the details of the object and (5) applying some finishing touches. During stage #4 one commits to allowing the details of the object, as they emerge from particular habits of drawing and particular habits of seeing, to determine to course of one’s pen or pencil (the
way the window-tree determines the course of one’s gaze). Stages #3 and #5 control the duration of the vulnerable stage #4, and stage #2 constitutes a moment of agency.

Realism involves committing to a particular course. That commitment must occur between bounds, bookends - closures. Figuration evacuates agency from the continuous space between closures. Within that space, an attempt at (re)production-according-to-certain-rules takes over. Video and audio recordings learn a set of rules from the moment of “start recording” to the moment of “stop recording”. They then act according to those rules from the moment of “start playback” to the moment of “stop playback”. In the interim, the rules change - the data-bearing medium (flash drive, SD card or whathaveyou) changes the data in subtle or unsubtle ways, accidental or otherwise - but realistic playback explicitly aims to consign agency to something prior.

Meanwhile, though, the medium exerts an agency. Agency proceeds from agent, and some agents open while others close. I might verbalize a choice to count the band in, click my drumsticks together and begin playing in 4/4 time, but, in the performance that follows, an audience observes my limbs acting according to an a priori. The intermediary - my memory - does not access my verbal apparatus and explicate its motives, but does access the rhythm I play, such that the other band members may feel surprise at my strange rendition of a musical gesture that I believe myself to be reproducing realistically from the one we agreed upon during the most recent rehearsal. In some words, the a priori does not date to the rehearsal but instead changed continuously according to the whim of memory between then and now. In other words, the ending of the rehearsal marked the closure of my verbal apparatus toward the rhythm, and the opening of my memory toward it. The moment I perform a beat then closes off my memory toward it. Likewise, the moment I choose to watch a tree pass my train window closes off my desire to watch the tree and opens up the tree’s passage across the window - I commit, over the next half-second, not to shifting my gaze but to allowing it to shift.

When I set out to compose, I commit, over the next, say, roughly-twenty-five minutes, not to prosecute my plans in music but to allow my training to write some music, as mediated by the (recombinant) whim of my memory. Before I make my commitment

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36 For a related discussion of closure and agency see Hall (1987).
and cede to habit, though, I can place restrictions on the space inhabited: ‘this piece will be for tuba soloist playing (in addition to the tuba) a laptop, two loudspeakers, and ankle-bells; this piece will be nine-point-five minutes long; it will sound quietly and continuously enough that most audiences can relax easily; it will end by quoting the opening theme from Beethoven’s third symphony; and it will start with a recording of a mockingbird played using the laptop through the loudspeakers’. (Usually I try to make precompositional decisions that force my training to engage a situation it wasn’t designed for. Otherwise that training tends to place me in the shadow of whoever devised it. I trust my subconscious to make detailed art but not surprising art.)

We can, consciously or otherwise, deviate from habit, induce a closure where we hadn’t planned from the outset for one to emerge. In other words, nothing forbids id, ego or some other shouting mental demon from intervening in the activities of another. Yet many musicians master their memories vis-à-vis the repertoire they perform. We have some capacity for commitment and some capacity for intervention.

Composing emerges in part from audiencing. When I set out to participate-as-audience, a contested palette of possible commitments greets me. Contested because, at present, the role of culture in constructing musical experience comes under fire for demanding privileged knowledge from its audience. Many composers feel they have to make music that can make sense to everyone - although generally with the caveat that everyone must greet that music with the right attitude. A very simple and salient taxonomy of such gestures arises in the writing of composer Marek Poliks, who promotes ‘hearing’ and derogates ‘listening’. In Poliks’s view, listening instrumentalizes perception for the purpose of interpretation, which, in short, empowers some audiences and not others. ‘Hearing,’ in comparing to ‘listening,’ functions less reductively by leaving one receptive to [pardon my quantitative mode - I can’t contrive an alternative way to understand Poliks’s priorities] a fuller range of sounding bodies.

We could make up other words for other ways of auditorily sensing. The French language carves up auditory sense through the verbs entendre and écouter. Entendre means something like ‘hear out’ or ‘recognize the presence of a message and attempt to interpret that message’, whereas écouter means something like “focus on auditory sense”.
If we put the two sets – hear/listen and écouter/entendre - together, an audience can ‘listen’ (commit to hearing a specific type of thing) or ‘hear’ (try to hear what greets them), ‘écoute’ (prioritize the sense of hearing) or ‘entendre’ (interpret the aurally-received utterance in good faith). Traditional music theory encourages one to listen and sometimes to entendre. Poliks unsurprisingly wants his audience to hear (all the prestigious delicacy! all the irreducibly complex emergent properties!). I unsurprisingly want audiences for my acousmatic music to écoute (since I feel more proficient in constructing with sound than with the other phenomena lurking in the performance space, such as the uncomfortable chairs). ‘Listen’ and ‘entendre’ favour translation. ‘Écouter’ consciously suspends translation but also tries to potentiate all sound as a translative medium (between the moods of some singing birds and my own mood, for example). ‘Hearing’ purposively avoids translation in order to make room for whatever else might emerge.

In my hearing/listening/entendre/écouter taxonomy, hearing functions ideally as a universal potential entrainment, an openness to sound in all its features, for a duration bounded by the beginning and end of a musical work (some applause, and some applause). Within that duration, an audience should seek, as Schoenberg says, the “finest ability - the ability to receive a total impression” (“Style and Idea, 8). Ironically though, Poliks rails against the continued influence of Schoenberg and “modernism” while seeking a complete, unifying, unreduced way of audiencing (2014). Poliks updates a Schoenberghian totality with an object-oriented ontology, where composing means “gathering bodies into hearing” and hearing “occurs at the coincidence of bodies, amplifying.” (2015) Amplifying all the coincidences of bodies? Or just those I hear first? Presumably, ideally, the former, since the latter would rather be listening, albeit while trying not to apply remembered knowledge.

But in a deconstructed world there is no such thing as a total impression. So then, where might pursuing the ideal of a totally permissive impression lead? My answer: to one of many impressions. Should we call one such impression reductive and another one not (or less so) (or evidence of the wrong audience practice)? No, I think, because indiscriminate antireductionism causes intolerable side effects. We know that all impressions emerge from cultures. We know that all impressions reduce. I want to avoid the eventuality in which one impression reduces totally by occurring ubiquitously.
Rejecting one or another impression on charges reductionism accidentally serves an anti-emanicipatory end, chiefly by assailing discourse’s vestiges of autonomy from capital. The mechanism goes as follows: the critique of reductionism applies in all cases and therefore affords no distinction between concepts. Continuing to use it sets the stage for some communicators to defend themselves against the critique more eloquently (i.e. disingenuously) than others. From these, one prevailing narrative will emerge as most efficient. In this way, in a competitive environment, any universally-applicable critique liquidates discussion to might-makes-right, allowing the advantaged to leverage their advantages - money, surprise and institutional backing, analogous to the capacity of richer corporations to hire better lawyers - and appear well-spoken for just a little longer than others, while telling an equally ridiculous story. To take a businesslike perspective on the situation, Poliks's against-the-world-stance makes operational sense given his status as a Harvard Ph.D candidate. (And aside, my antipathy toward his grandstanding makes operational sense given that I self-market in a relatively close niche as composer/writer. Perhaps I want to do some grandstanding myself? Formidable reasons exist to hold the philosophies of all aspirants suspect, whether you go after Heidegger, Poliks or me.)

What kind of power do I want to acknowledge in my audience? Schoenberg taught formenlehre, that practice of close-reading and taxonomy designed to help an audience listen-for and remember some details of a musical work, to resolve blur into feature. Formenlehre somehow determines the details it resolves, bothering Poliks and a lot of other people, not least because whatever it reveals to an audience of composers tends to resurface in the works of those composers. Taught too repeatedly or too coercively (i.e in the usual style of an undergraduate curriculum), formenlehre displaces other ideas and constricts the career prospects of students who 'don’t get it'. Formenlehre's progenitors didn’t intend their craft as total curriculum, though. They also furnished it as a tool for audiences, for example to transform a bland concert into an interesting concert by bringing some subtle formal elements into sensibility. We shouldn’t reject a way of curating perception because it doesn’t bring all elements into sensibility! Many exhibits can take their turns in the gallery, and nobody expects us to stay inside the gallery all the time. Trying to stuff everything imaginable in there constitutes a quixotic exercise if one ever existed.
Listening affords an audience the power to pick their own adventure; to not-hear some present bodies, and to hear some that no composer placed in front of them - effectively, to (re)compose. Conversely, hearing affords sounding bodies the capacity to surprise an audience in surprising ways, by occurring where a listening audience might not think to listen. In order to hear, an audience must put aside their mediating assumptions. But mediating assumptions often function in good ways. I’m reminded of the modernist aphorism that composing rigorously, as opposed to improvising freely, helps one break out of one’s habits.

§3 - Curating Influences

In order to teach their aesthetic, a modern academic must gain admissions, pass tests, procure grants and get jobs. Each threshold applies its own evaluation criteria and comprises part of a series of thresholds that compartmentalizes instituted life. Each threshold enforces a medium-specificity, an autonomy, an accentuated difference. To translate between them means to find points of indifference between the segregated elements of a syncretic assemblage. To hold on to something, to conserve something robust and non-adapted about oneself, to say ‘you can listen for this feature of me now, and you can listen for this feature of me later, and they will bear a continuous relationship’, one must boil one’s self down to something present both now and then. One must reduce oneself.

Grant-writing responds to two questions: ‘how do I justify my work as a good?’ and ‘who can evaluate my work?’ For any applicant, the work evaluated comprises two potentially-overlapping categories: work in the discipline, and work on the grant application. A standard critique of meritocratic granting institutions goes as follows. Evaluative institutions assume the fiction of a non-Heisenbergian universe: that applicants practice work-in-the-discipline a priori and applicational work a posteriori. But on repeated passes applicational work disciplines work-in-the-discipline, since applicants respond to tactical pressure by optimizing the first type of work against the formula imposed by the second. Therefore applicants progressively reduce all their work to applicational work. The work-application cycle rejects sensorial features of work-in-the-discipline, producing
art practices dominated by textually-expressible constructs in whatever medium looks good on a resumé.

A standard critique of art-school applications proceeds differently: conservatories pick candidates ‘aesthetocratically’, based on instructor-adjudicators’ tastes. Portfolio-based application processes proceed inexplicably because, tastes being tastes, evaluators can act according to them but not explain them. But the applicational work that looms in the future appeals to explicability. One must be an artist here and a writer there.

Graduating from a post-secondary institution predicates on students’ passing the eponymous threshold: grades. Grades reward students for detecting, and then consenting to, a set of social contracts (mostly with their teachers, presently encumbered with the extraneous task of (pass/fail) gatekeeping). These social contracts frame spaces of imitation - do this, here and that, there. Entrain to this rhythm, reconstruct this figure, etc.

The student position mimics the structure of the academic system in imposing a type of broadband-but-constrained listening, a sensitivity to one mandatory set of codes. To spend too much attention investigating one thing risks failing to hear a crucial rules-change. Students live in a world of many shifting wants and pay for each one they ignore.

The fourth evaluation process, institutional hiring, presses applicants to showcase their memories: I learned this, I can document this, I can teach this; my life experiences cohabit in my mind and emerge in the syllabus I here present to you. I can reproduce the parts of my life that came a priori. I keep my commitments. Ignorant, reducing, originality or theoretical listening can finally function to the applicant’s advantage where they define a niche.

But the sequence of rubrics doesn’t end here, and as it marches on and the idiosyncrasies pile up, hearing-and-then-reacting emerges as the order of the day. Disjunction after disjunction punishes listening and reifies the impossibility of translation. Where portfolio did not translate into grades did not translate into grant money did not translate into syllabus, the jargons of separate disciplines do not translate into each other. In the extreme, only quantities translate: quantities of publications, citations, students enrolled, dollars donated. Who wants to translate other qualities, like those modernist bogeymen form and truth? When we bring objects together, may we do so in discourse
rather than disjunct co-presence? What holds in both auditory and literary experience? What can I continue to hold onto, in order to construct accounts or convey something in that something’s absence? And then, what frames of reference can I leave behind? The more frequent, the more chaotic, the evaluative disjunctions, the more one’s chosen values become uneducated guesses.

At each moment, I have to leave something, if not behind, then at least out. Practices mediate each other; some practices suffer from constant reduction, constant overmediation; some practices therefore need insulation in order for their salutary properties to emerge. But to insulate, one must surround with a space devoid of channels - surround with a negative space. In modernity, critique could insulate postulation from postulation. Some postulations were wrong and deserved annihilation. Now that we can deconstruct everything, modernist-style critique affords nothing except the opportunity to cut everything down to its proper size (infinitesimal) and turn every knowledge-structure into a homogenous purée or a singular grand negation. To insulate, now, requires a post-deconstruction version of critique. Here is mine.

Critique need not attempt to negate permanently, but rather identify bourgeoning potentialities that might, unchecked, function as suppressive potentialities. I like Deleuze but sometimes I must criticize (or even ignore) Deleuze when it begins to seem obligatory for everyone around me to cite Deleuze. Not contrarian but alterian - creating a temporary space for the alternate, without opposing the posited except on the grounds that, right now, it masks too many other things. Stravinsky’s self-restrictions created nurturing spaces for intuitions he wished to endemicize within each particular work. He didn’t advocate any one of them as suitable for widespread imposition.37

Protective critique has a prebuilt niche resisting certain pressures from the neoliberal job market, where the ideal of infinite adaptability supports compulsion to entertain everything-all-the-time, but where competition pits entertainments against each other. Here, the tactically-inclined simply replace the distasteful oppression of (negatively) critiquing with the jovial largesse of (positively) advertising, reducing interaction to an experiment on that timeless research question, ‘whose position will take up all the space?’

37 Nor did he consider himself a conceptual thinker. See Stravinsky (1959), 12.
Post-deconstruction critique can ameliorate this liquidation or exacerbate it. In choosing mosaic over melting-pot, we might just produce a war of all tiles against all other tiles. But I write here of art, and mosaics seem altogether more tasteful than melting pots - wouldn’t you agree?

The freewheeling 1970s bequeathed composers a pluralism of self-conscious style-collage - tone-rows next to tonal prolongations next to noisy extended techniques next to aleatoric notation and structured improvisation and digital synthesis and tape loops, etc etc etc. But now we can have mosaic auditory modes too: sometimes we try to hear, sometimes we try to listen, sometimes we entendre or écoute, or any number of arbitrary others. I recommend the heterogenous experience of syncretic sensation: we can choose from among many ways of applying our aural sense. To choose means that the type of stimulus confronting us doesn’t dictate the type of aurality we meet it with. Hearing, listening, etc... each make their own sacrifices. In order to choose from among the types of aurality in our repertoire, we need to entertain more than one type of aurality, and enact from among them in accordance with our personal motivations. We shouldn’t learn a best way of audiencing.

(When the-now-preeminently-citable John Cage stated, upon noticing the sounds of his blood pumping and ears ringing, that “one need not fear for the future of music”, (8) he didn’t mean that we ought to compose all sounds, or even compose using any and all sounds as material; rather, he noted our capacity to audience all sounds (especially unintended sounds) musically. I would like to stress, to a superlative degree, that Cage’s advice about the auditory sense does not apply to composition. ‘Hearing-instread-of-listening’ gives an audience a repertoire of ways to enjoy music whose rhetorical figures would displease - or especially bore - them. An anechoic chamber doesn’t offer you any sonic messages from other people, but with an open mind you’ll discover the sound of your own heart. Similarly, that silly song your friend showed you may not communicate anything interesting, but encountering it affords you the opportunity to hear things independent of the songwriter’s competency with auditory symbols - say, the fascinating and unique tuning of their ukulele. Listening enables communication. Hearing enables escape from communication.)
So, modes of perception don't match one-to-one with perceptual objects. In hearing or listening, we can choose which mind we open up, although, as highlighted by the spatial analogy I began with, some senses in some contexts readily lose territory to others and can emerge only with encouragement. If we want heterogeneity we need to practice encouragement without encouragement-to-ubiquity. In principle Poliks believes something similar: hearing subordinates easily to listening, and therefore needs protection, the way Greenberg thought flatness needed protection from perspective and therethrough from literature. But since nobody can count the set of possible modes-of-sensing, what with each relation creating its own version of sense, what does it mean 'to protect one mode of sensing from submergence beneath another'? *Cultures die, don't they?* Why try to conserve all the items in an uncountably infinite set?

Don't try - one can think of conservation only with respect to a finite set of cases, not as an axiom. But I think I can defend the conservation of a certain type of thing, sometimes, on the basis of aesthetic taste. Doesn't all great modernist art involve some sense of conservation? If a Poliks or a Ferneyhough or a Greenberg wants to ensconce a Poliksian or Ferneyhovian or Greenbergian microculture, let's encourage them to do so on a microscale. Non-hubristic modernism, the self-consciously idealistic experiment of momentarily sustaining an insulated microcosmos, produces beautiful ornaments. Brought into the mind of an audience, as by Cage's clever constructs for soliciting us to explore our own cosmoses, the project proceeds elegantly, and to this post-post-Cagean generation, *easily* - easily as hypnotizing a consenting subject accustomed to being hypnotized. Everyone automatically generates their own microcosmos! So why bother comparing them?! It's not original to undertake the project of originating *something, anything*. It's always been interesting to try to get *you* to adopt *my* something, however temporarily. So it fails to surprise when a Poliks or Ferneyhough or Greenberg, despite their gestures at wanting to protect a minority presence, strives for the top of a pedagogical hierarchy and endeavours to majoritize a specific outlook in subsequent generations of students.

I inherit the voices of various pedagogues and open them up in practicing any of the disciplines I have learned. Any ability I possess to place their confidences in perspective emerges from my ability to listen to them reductively. If I hear Ferneyhough's
words and music, my fingers will hear them again when I compose. If I *listen* to Ferneyhough’s words and music, my composing fingers will have the opportunity to hear my own mediated rehashing of that music. If I listen too acutely, I can instigate a feedback loop, sensing in Ferneyhough only what I have already heard in myself. But I don’t want to inherit indiscriminately. Knowing that my fingers have long and sticky memories, I don’t want to expose them to every lesson Ferneyhough’s music can teach me. I may want to cut some of his habits off at the pass - not-hear phenomena I don’t want to perpetuate or recreate - or I may want to mentally review certain phenomena instead of attending to each phenomenon in turn. We *can* use the ritual and physical compartments of the concert hall to enclose a space of openness. Within the concert, an intuitive experience of hearing can occur. But don’t feel guilty for hearing a language and beginning to listen, or for, perhaps, talking about it afterwards. To discourse; to flow with currents and part them.
Bibliography


Appendix A.

*Flatness* Audio Recording

**Description**

Studio recording of *Flatness*, created at the Simon Fraser University School for the Contemporary Arts from September 13th to 28th, 2016. Formatted as a one-track album.

**Filename**

Flatness_StudioVersion_FullAlbum.mp3