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Perspective

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PERSPECTIVE**Perspectives****Hi-Tech Everything: A Fragmented Report from the Heart of Techno-Consumerism**

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In September 2017, I represented Philips at Europe's biggest consumer electronics fair, IFA, in Berlin. Curious to find out how the dreams of a smooth technologised world are constructed and disseminated from the inside, I applied for a job with a PR agency that represents Philips Consumer Lifestyle at trade fairs worldwide. After attending an interview and submitting various kinds of photo and video footage I was hired to promote the latest innovations in 'Male Grooming'.

1. Restrictions

Agreement, dated 18 August 2017

Between

1. XXX (the 'Client');
2. Dani Ploeger (the 'Freelancer')

The Freelancer has agreed to make their services available to the Client on the terms and conditions set out in this Agreement.

(...)

10 Confidential Information

(...)

- 10.1.9 All notes, memoranda, records, documents and other works (whether recorded on paper, computer memory or discs or otherwise) made by the Freelancer in the course of their duties or relating to the activities of the Client and any copies thereof or other records prepared from such notes, memoranda, records, documents and other works or information contained therein shall be and remain the property of the Client and together with any Confidential Information in the Freelancer's possession, custody or control

shall be promptly handed over by the Freelancer to the Client on the date on which this Agreement is terminated and at any stage during the term of this Agreement when requested by the Client.

10.1.10 The provisions of this clause 10 shall survive the termination or expiry of this Agreement for whatever reason.

2. A public document made by a third party



Video 1: Consumer Tech (2017). Philips @ IFA 2017, Berlin. <https://youtu.be/PRJarzAuoGs>.

As you can see in this video document, which is available in the public domain, I promoted Philips V-Track Precision Blades PRO with 8-directional ContourDetect technology, among other innovations in shaving technology. Dressed in a neatly ironed shirt with the company logo on the front and the text 'How can I make your life better?' printed on the back, I spent seven days addressing thousands of consumers and retailers through a little portable loudspeaker.

3. Notes on a public document made by a third party

The following are some thoughts in response to the video above, which do not form part of the 'notes, memoranda, records, documents and other works' I ('the Freelancer') made as part of my duties for 'the Client' (see paragraph 10.1.9).

Like the shaving devices, most products on the Philips stand are domestic technologies focused on health and well-being: robotic vacuum cleaners and air purifiers (3000 series with 'VitaShield IPS' and 'Aerasense technology'); low-fat air cookers (with 'unique Rapidair Technology'); data-collecting baby care products ('AVENT uGrow baby development tracker'); electric toothbrushes that monitor your brushing technique through a phone app (Sonicare FlexCare Platinum Connected). These domestic technologies, which in various ways are related and connected to their users' bodies, are promoted under the central slogan that appears across the stand: 'There's Always a Way to Make Life Better'.

The connection between the body and a desire for improvement that is thus established is reminiscent of Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) discussion of the transition from a culture organised around a notion of 'health', towards an engagement with bodies that is shaped around the concept of 'fitness'. Health has traditionally operated as a normative principle, marking a boundary between a state of normality and abnormality (disease), which can be described and often measured to a degree of precision. Being 'in good health' has been connected to a sense of the body being in an adequate condition to meet certain socially determined requirements, such as acting out a profession. On the contrary, the concept of 'fitness' is connected to subjective experience and not tied to a measurable, finite state. There is no end to fitness, you can always be 'fitter'. Accordingly, Bauman points out that 'Life organised around the pursuit of fitness promises a lot of victorious skirmishes, but never the final triumph' (2000: 78).

Bauman considers this as a symptom of what he calls 'liquid modernity', which entails a society where the organisational and power structures of modern society have become unstable in a way that promotes insecurity and anxiety tied to ever-increasing consumption. Thus, the attachment of the slogan 'There's Always a Way to Make Life Better' to body-related technologies conveniently directs liquid-modern consumers' anxieties around their ever-elusive fitness goals towards an incentive to continuously replace their domestic consumer technologies for the latest, improved version.

Another point of interest in the way in which domestic technologies are promoted here relates to Russell Davies' (2009) concept of the postdigital. Davies describes the postdigital as a condition where society has been saturated with digital technologies and where they have been integrated into the everyday to such an extent that their presence starts to lose prominence in people's perception. Meanwhile, concepts developed as part of digital on-screen and online formats start to be implemented in other aspects of life in the physical world.

The fact that the toothbrushes, vacuum cleaners and baby care products mentioned above have now all become the domain of advanced digital technologies might be an indication that we are indeed at the dawn of a postdigital era. At the same time, the way in which shaving machines are promoted suggests that the transfer of principles originating in the realm of digital technology goes beyond merely 'stuff that digital technologies have catalysed online and on screens' (2009: n.p).

The terminology used in relation to the shavers' technical aspects (V-Track Precision Blade PRO, 8-directional ContourDetect technology), as well as the model designations of the devices ('7000 Series', '9000 Series'), resemble the jargon that was in previous eras reserved for high-tech innovations in the specialist domain of scientific, military and (personal) computing technology. Note the formal similarity with names used for high-end computer components, such as 'ASUS H170 PRO Gaming ATX Motherboard' or 'Intel Core 2 Quad Processor Q6600'. The spill-over of this jargon into the realm of shaving devices means that this product, which previously might have been considered as a rather unspectacular, long-life home appliance, is now increasingly likely to be perceived as part of the realm of semi-disposable high-tech items that operates according to a logic of rapid innovation.

Thus, it appears that a postdigital condition will affect the broader field of commodity marketing as well. While the far-going integration of digital technologies into everyday life leads to a decline in users' conscious experience of their presence, this also facilitates the dissolution of clearly perceptible boundaries between digital commodities and devices that were traditionally considered as long-life products. At last, we might see the incorporation of *all* commodities into the paradigm of rapid product obsolescence and high-speed consumption.

4. Post-script

12.1 The Freelancer shall not, whether directly or indirectly, or whether on their own behalf or on behalf of any other person, firm or company, or as agent, director, partner, manager, employee, consultant or shareholder of or in any other person, firm or company:

(...)

12.1.2 At any time after the termination of this Agreement, in any way hold itself or himself out as engaged by, representing or acting for the Client.



Video 2: Philips (2017). Philips Stand Impression|IFA 2017. <https://youtu.be/sU2wiqgnw0k>.

Author Information

Dani Ploeger combines performance, video, computer programming and electronics hacking to investigate and subvert the spectacles of techno-consumer culture. Re-purposing, mis-using, and at times destroying everyday devices, his artwork exposes seemingly banal and taken-for-granted aspects of digital culture as objects of both physical beauty and political power. He holds a PhD from the School of Media, Film and Music at the University of Sussex and is currently a Research Fellow at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Detroit '67: Temporalities of Theatrical Representation in the Context of Memorialisation

Mary Anderson¹, Richard Haley¹ and Billicia Charnelle Hines¹

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In his landmark 1996 speech 'The Ground on Which I Stand,' playwright August Wilson addressed the implicit racism undergirding the exclusion of black voices from participation in the American professional theatre. Wilson was motivated to



Figure 1: *Detroit '67*. Photo: Billicia Hines.

speak out at the time because, among other reasons, only one of sixty-six members of the League of Resident Theatres (LORT) was dedicated primarily to producing the works of African American playwrights. The LORT, the largest professional theatre association of its kind in the United States, serves a particular social, political and aesthetic function within the professional theatrical landscape in the US because of the historic significance of regional theatres in America (O'Quinn, 2015). Whereas it might be taken as commonplace to see the large, heavily market-driven houses of Broadway and Off-Broadway absent of consistent content from African American artists, Wilson's recognition at the time that the professional regional theatres were also imbalanced in terms of form and content by African American playwrights and theatre makers was troubling. Today the statistics are of even greater concern. Of seventy-two LORT theatres, not one is a dedicated black theatre. In response to these circumstances, innovations in community-based theatre, site-specific theatre and other modes of theatre shared outside of purpose-built theatrical spaces are helping to catalyse an increase in experimentation with how to operationalise the core black aesthetic values around ideas of *for us, by us, near us, about us*, to which Wilson and others have spoken.

On the twentieth anniversary of Wilson's speech, contemporary theatre artists reflected on his call with a series of dialogues and colloquia in an effort to gauge the state of black theatre in the 21st Century. In her response 'New Ground on Old Land,' emerging playwright Dominique Morisseau explains that Wilson's essay provided her with the basis for many of her writing principles. Furthermore, Morisseau identifies the abiding political function of Wilson's perspective when she writes:

We revisit this speech during a wave of national political unrest. The time to agitate these uncomfortable circumstances and inspire social change and collective human understanding is now. ... We can no longer practice the same marginalization in theatre that is destroying our national humanity. Theatre practitioners cannot be as fearful as broken Americans who seek to "make America great again" by silencing people of color and reverting to cultural, racial, and gender oppression. We have to make our audiences as balanced as the art we seek to produce (2016).



Figure 2: Lot across the street from performance site. Photo: Billicia Hines.

The plays of Dominique Morisseau can be interpreted as a direct response to August Wilson's 1996 call to action. Her trilogy of plays, *Detroit Projects*, have garnered her international attention as a unique voice in the articulation of the black experience. In these three plays, which are all set in the rust-belt city of Detroit, one of the most influential and misaligned cities in the American imaginary (Appadurai, 1996), Morisseau explores the form and function of historical representation in dramatic contexts. The most significant play in Morisseau's trilogy, *Detroit '67*, is a fictional account of characters whose lives are irreparably transformed during the city's July 1967 uprising. The 1967 Detroit Rebellion, commonly known as the 1967 Race Riot, is among the most violent and destructive in United States history. In addition to the loss of forty three lives and extensive property damage, the events of 1967 and their aftermath have had an abiding impact on the construction of narratives about the city and their relationship to the socio-political realities of those left behind.

One of the most significant elements of Morisseau's expressive voice is the presence and influence of music in her work. '*Detroit '67* is as much a play about music as it is a play with music. Though most plays about music follow the lives of musicians, the compelling thread of *Detroit '67* is its exploration of music as the equalizer, as hope, and as culture' (Storckman, 2015). This is in keeping



Figure 3: Detroit '67. Photo: Billicia Hines.

with the lineage of Wilson's plays, in which there is an 'incisive functionality and multidimensionality of music' (Elam, 2006: 28) to such an extent that scholar Harry J. Elam has concluded that 'the music is the message' (2006: 27). Music, in the world of the plays of Wilson and Morisseau, helps to move the action forward, but also comments on that action, shapes the audience's response to that action and enunciates the distinctive temporalities that the characters inhabit, where '[p]ast and present, history and memory, ritual and reality all collide' (Elam, 2006: 1). In what follows, we offer analysis of Detroit Public Theatre's mobile production of *Detroit '67*, which is currently on tour throughout the city as part of a large-scale memorialisation of the uprising. We will focus on an instance in which 'time stops' in the music and therefore music 'stops time' or otherwise intervenes in the 'acceleration of history' characterised by a 'rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good, a general perception that anything and everything may disappear ... a rupture of equilibrium' (Nora, 1989: 7) as it is experienced in audiencing of the play. Drawing on philosophies of time, temporality and temporalisation to inform our understanding, we will explore the dynamic oscillations between past and present,



Figure 4: Detroit '67. Photo: Billicia Hines.

between fact and fiction, as they transpire within the context of the actor-audience relationship in the 50th anniversary site-specific performance of *Detroit '67*.

Music and Mobility: Audiencing and Agency in Acoustic Space

Philosopher Tzachi Zamir explains that conventional theatrical relationships between actors and audience members are characterised by 'an entry into a *fictional* space upheld by the shared imaginative effort of a performer and a spectator' (2014: 121, emphasis in the original). In a process he refers to as 'existential amplification,' Zamir explains that although the space of shared imaginative effort is *fictional*, it is nonetheless composed of a combination of fictional and non-fictional elements and involves processes that are characterised simultaneously by embodiment and disembodiment (2014: 25). In this respect, the shared imaginative effort that is particular to the actor-audience relationship in live performance experiences is always informed by a 'heightened consideration of the moment passing' (Profeta, 2015: xi) as performance 'becomes itself through disappearance' (Phelan, 1993: 146) and 'the present only manifests as a past, as a former passingness' (Grant, 2014:

134). Indeed, 'any artwork holds together various times of production and reception, not only as we confront it in the present of our own experience, but also as other moments are inscribed in the work as it passes through history' (Foster, 2015: 140). However, in a site-specific performance taking place on the anniversary of a significant historical event, the conventional theatrical relationships between actors and audience members are altered further because the experience of time, itself, is amplified and therefore augmented.



Figure 5: Detroit '67. Photo: Billicia Hines.



Figure 6: Detroit '67. Photo: Billicia Hines.

In the world of *Detroit '67*, the timing, tempo and agency associated with playing music is directly tied to the livelihoods and prospects of hope for the characters. Throughout the play, all five characters (adult siblings Chelle and Lank; longtime friends of the siblings Bunny and Sly; and stranger Caroline) use music as a way to connect to and express their emotional states. Furthermore, the presence of songs placed strategically in each scene is the single strongest indicator of the temporal location of the play for audience members. Morisseau also establishes a constant tension between music and technology, which provides her with an engine for conflict that moves the action of the play forward. The conflict is at once symbolic and concrete. Running an unlicensed bar out of the basement of their home, Chelle and Lank need music to provide the atmosphere for their business. The success of this illicit enterprise hinges on their ability to meet customers' expectations, as another 'after-hours joint' has 'tightened it up' with a new 'hi fi' (Morisseau, 2014: 9). But the siblings disagree about how best to use the limited resources they have to enhance the customer experience. Chelle, a widow supporting a grown son who is away at college, is also the bearer of the family history, and so nostalgically and prudently favors using her late father's record player, encouraging Lank to purchase more records. But Lank, a technophile, instead uses their money to purchase an 8 track.

These fictional circumstances were particularly resonant for the audience members in attendance at the 50th anniversary production of *Detroit '67*, who were acutely aware of the fact that African Americans in Detroit had limited opportunities for upward mobility, suffering from housing and employment discrimination and a brutal, biased police force. Making these circumstances even more poignant, the 1967 uprising came about from a police raid on just such an unlicensed bar on the precise ground where we were seated. This was hallowed ground which had until recent months been an empty, open field for fifty years, all contents having burned to the ground at the end of five days of rebellion. Now, for the duration of the play, we were seated within the nascent state of a park, built as a remembrance to the events of 1967 and their aftermath. Within this landscape, we, as the very real members

of the future that fictional Lank was imagining, were aware not only of what would become of this block, but also of the ultimate obsolescence of the 8 track, which was supplanted by digital technologies that are now, paradoxically, in competition with a resurgence of interest in vinyl. In this regard, Morisseau scripts the conflict between Chelle's record player and Lank's 8 track, which transpires over the course of the play, as a symbol in itself.

Technology presents itself as stubborn throughout *Detroit '67*. In the opening scene, Chelle is alone on stage making preparations in the basement, accompanied by The Temptations' 'Ain't Too Proud to Beg' on the record player:

(Chelle sings along as she works to untangle the Christmas lights. Suddenly the record skips.)

Chelle. Dang it!

(She hurries to the record player and moves the needle past the skip. Goes back to singing. It skips again.)

Chelle. *(cont.)* Not this part ... come on!



Figure 7: *Detroit '67*. Photo: Billicia Hines.

(She goes to fix it again.)

(to the record player) You gonna behave now?

(Waits. Watches it. It seems cool. She goes back to untangling the lights. The record player skips again.)

Dang it! *(She plays with the needle.)* You got something against David Ruffin? Huh? What's the matter? *(She waits for an answer from the player)*

(Morisseau, 2014: 7–8).

Chelle proceeds to engage the record player in a dialogue that casts the device as an agent with power, influence, feelings and behaviors. Placing central focus on the agency of the record player and the sounds that it produces is the first signal that Morisseau has created a play in which acoustic space is on equal footing with visual space. This is a highly unconventional dynamic in the theatre, which privileges the 'world of reflected light,' the mesmerisation of the stage picture:

We, who live in the world of reflected light, in visual space, may also be said to be in a state of hypnosis. Ever since the collapse of the oral tradition in



Figure 8: Detroit '67. Photo: Billicia Hines.

early Greece, before the age of Parmenides, Western civilization has been mesmerized by a picture of the universe as a limited container in which all things are arranged according to the vanishing point, in linear geometric order. The intensity of this conception is such that it actually leads to the abnormal suppression of hearing and touch in some individuals ... Most of the information we rely upon comes through our eyes; our technology is arranged to heighten that effect. Such is the power of Euclidean or visual space that we can't live with a circle unless we square it (McLuhan, 2004: 68).

Because the world McLuhan describes is so overwhelmingly biased toward visual space – a condition that has only been amplified now in the 21st Century – surely Morisseau's acoustic intervention has limited impact. This would especially be the case when *Detroit '67* is produced in a purpose-built theatre that is designed to privilege light. In the 50th anniversary site-specific performance, however, something perhaps unexpected occurred regarding the visual space that enabled the



Figure 9: *Detroit '67*. Photo: Billicia Hines.



Figure 10: Detroit '67. Photo: Billicia Hines.

acoustic space to hold greater influence. In this production, as we were drawn into the particularities of the relationship between Chelle and the acoustic technologies, we were simultaneously experiencing a heightened state of awareness of the permeability of the visual space, as the performance was taking place in the open air, in the light of day, with, among other things, a cadre of police appointed to stand guard. This created a co-presence of multiple temporalities that amplified the vulnerability of this particular site, as the most significant landmark of the violence that occurred before, during and after the uprising. By comparison, in the darkness of a conventional purpose-built theatrical space in which the stage would be the sole destination for light – the womb of visual information into which we would be peering – the acoustic would once again be displaced. But because the site-specific performance invited so much light in from so many different directions, we were experiencing a barrage of visual information that thus made the acoustic space much more important.

The experience of visual barrage is described by Paul Virilio, for whom light, as a form of absolute speed, collapses both space and time and is productive of

a 'picnoletic' state of consciousness in which time goes missing (1991: 19). This absence, or visual gap, opens a space wherein the play's music and the characters' relationship to the technologies producing the music became a kind of tuning point, a way of drawing us into the acoustic space that opens up a world of audio experience that we would not otherwise attend to in the same way. Martin Welton explores this phenomenon in 'Seeing Nothing: Now Hear This...' (2012), which documents a theatrical piece that took place in complete darkness. Complicite's production of *The Encounter* explores an emphasis on the acoustic in a different manner. Morisseau's intervention is made even more clear by a note from the playwright printed in the program:

Playwright's Rules of Engagement

You are allowed to laugh audibly.

You are allowed to have audible moments of reaction and response.

My work requires a few "um hmms" and "uhm hnnns" should you need



Figure 11: Crowd gathers across the street from performance site. Photo: Billicia Hines.

to use them. Just maybe in moderation. Only when you really need to vocalize.

This can be church for some of us, and testifying is allowed.

This is also live theater and the actors need you to engage with them, not distract them, or thwart their performance.

Please be an audience member that joins with others and allow a bit of breathing room. Exhale together. Laugh together. Say “amen” should you need to.

This is community. Let’s go.

peaceandlovedominique :)

Arguably, even if not read, Morisseau’s rules are tacitly, implicitly and explicitly understood by the audience in attendance at the 50th anniversary production of *Detroit '67* in a different way from an audience in attendance at Detroit Public Theatre’s black box space. The community attending the site-specific performance has a cultural relationship to these ‘rules’ and, further, due to the nature of the memorial context of the performance, the practices of call-and-response and invocation are all the more pertinent. What eventuates is that the attention toward the sonic landscape then welcomes the complexity of the ambient sounds of the environment as much as it invites the ‘need to speak’ (Rodenberg, 2015) from audience members. At one point, a heated conversation transpires a hundred yards across the street from the performance. Voices in conflict pour into the sonic environment due to a situation having nothing to do with the play, itself. Yet this dimension is influential in an ambiguous, elliptical way, which parallels the ricochet of meaning and information as characters within the play describe their experiences of police brutality in a 1960’s setting while actual police men and women surround the performance to protect the performers and audience members.

Conclusion

Investigation of this moment of temporal disruption in Detroit Public Theatre’s mobile production of *Detroit '67* and its implications for the creation of acoustic space invites a reconsideration of the aporetic function of theatrical representation in the city’s

project of memorialisation and reconciliation. For the past fifty years, the memory of the Detroit Rebellion has been experienced as an unresolved blemish, a scar on the city with profoundly deep, devastating and far-reaching impacts. The memory of the Detroit Rebellion has been governed and produced largely by polarised, bifurcated notions about race, class and history, itself. Attending to the fundamentally aporetic space achieved through the temporal frictions and inconsistencies we find in art enables new space for reflection on these circumstances and, one would hope, forms of reconciliation based on the fundamental principles of *unknowing*. It is in this spirit that John Baldacchino recommends that we embrace art's 'groundless forms of meaning', which are 'beyond product and process' (2008: 244). In order to do this, however, one must contemplate the ways in which art is *neither* product *nor* process:

Art is not a product, even when there seems to be an object called *art*. Likewise art cannot be reduced to a process, even when many make an argument for art as a process in order to avoid it becoming a product. To define art from within the paradoxical assumption that it is an *in-between* would help us understand the art form's open character (Baldacchino, 2008: 244).

In this and other ways, the presence of music within the plays of Morisseau enables a fundamental restoration of the 'kinetic musicality' (Defrantz, 2004: 74) associated with African diasporic art and performance (Dixon Gottschild, 1996). Placing focus on the role of music within these plays enables us to 'reset notions of agency' (Hansen and Callison, 2014) not only in terms of theatrical creation but also in terms of the specific socio-political dimensions of Morisseau's project, promoting a fuller realisation of the multi-dimensional presence of music and movement as interpretive and political devices within the world of Morisseau's plays.

Author Information

Mary Anderson (Associate Professor, Theatre and Dance, Wayne State University) and Richard Haley (Lecturer, Art, Wayne State University) are a research team that writes about performance, art and narrative in the city of Detroit. Their publications have

appeared in *Body, Space, Technology, Performance Matters, Infinite Mile and About Performance*. Billicia Charnelle Hines is the Director of the Black Theatre Program and Assistant Professor of Theatre at Wayne State University. She has presented at numerous conferences including the Black Theatre Network and the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. For 2016–17, she was awarded a grant from the Michigan Humanities Council for her year-long project of theatre-making and community collaboration, *Detroit 1967: Page to Stage*.

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Vocality, Space, and Mediated Works

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My recent site-specific performance work, *Threshold*, explores vocality in space, successive iterations of creative and archival material, and modular and collaborative methods. Relational performance strategies form the basis of the piece, with group devising techniques influencing aesthetic forms and contributing to the practicalities of production. Via reflective and hybrid/poetic writing approaches, I explore the practical, theoretical, and creative aspects of iterative/multi-form works and the (re)mediated traces which emerge in a project's wake: video-audio documentation of exploratory processes; filmed live rehearsals and performance media; and pre- and post-performance stand-alone media projects.

Intro

Threshold is a site-specific new music *postopera*¹ loosely inspired by the enigmatic Greek initiatory rites, The Eleusinian Mysteries— an ancient biannual mythopoetic underworld journey and ceremonial retelling of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (c. seventh century BCE).

Threshold premiered on April 30, 2017 in Houston, Texas. The work was created for The Silos at Sawyer Yards, a mid-20th century rice factory. Now, the facility is a raw industrial space offered for artistic use. It is an enormous, labyrinthine complex of silos with reverbative and resonant qualities.

The music for *Threshold* was created through semi-structured improvisation and group devising methods. For the performance, the cast and audience walked through the space together. Voices, instrumental sound, and pre-recorded audio reverberated in infinite directions.

¹ The term *postopera* is inspired by Jelena Novak's *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (2016), an extensive exploration of new opera, voice, body, and media.

Threshold Creative Team:

Misha Penton, concept, director-producer, soprano, libretto, directorial scores.

Creative Contributors: George Heathco, electric guitars. Luke Hubley, percussion.

Sherry Cheng, Neil Ellis Orts, Michael Walsh, voices.

Music by Penton, Heathco, Hubley.



Image 1: *Threshold* PR still. L-R: Misha Penton, Neil Ellis Orts (kneeling), Michael Walsh, Sherry Cheng. The Silos at Sawyer Yards. April 2017. Photo by Raul Casares.

Vocality in Space

Ruins. Light. Shadow

A procession

Standing water

Tap. Tap. Tap of steps splashing through puddles on concrete

Concrete where there ought to be marble

In this cathedral

No one else cares for this space. They claim they tend to it, but they do not

*I swing wide the door
 The sun filters in and the wind swoops by me—
 wind pulled by The Great Fan in the Rose Window of the south transept
 I see delicate floating white tufts. Dandelion pappi?
 No, they are feathers
 White droppings in a corner
 Pigeons roost in the nave rafters*

I try, unsuccessfully, to chase the birds out with a broom. Priestess duties. Director duties. What duties are not director duties? I want to sweep the entry, before they arrive. I clean the filthy empty shelves with a water-filled spray bottle and brown paper towels. I push-broom out leaves that have wafted through the entry. I roam through the whole of this concrete and steel world, a labyrinth of towering cylinders, and I pick up bits of trash that have made their way in: old glass bottles, sheets of molding paper, plastic wrappers. I pass The Dead Decomposing Rat. I leave him be, as usual. He is guardian: a wee spirit in this desolation by the train tracks.

I touch everything. I cannot care for things I do not touch.

I follow the flit of a bird through the crossing and realise the pigeons did not enter from the west end. I find their roosting spot high up in the apse. I ascend the few grey-painted diamond plate steps and look up: holes in the steelwork of the altarpiece peer out at me with a red rust stare. Droppings. Small white feathers float. How do they get in and out? Through the ambulatory?

*I listen for the voice of this place
 I lend my voice to this place
 I Breathe. Whisper. Sigh. Gasp. Scream
 My wails bounce, call, and echo*

*My voice is my body
 My body is my voice*



Video 1: Solo voice experiment and walk-through at the Silos. Misha Penton. Winter 2017. Video edit: 01:26. Direct link on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/237963706/babe37d40d>.

Sound, like breath, is experienced as a movement of coming and going, inspiration and expiration. If that is so, then we should say of the body, as it sings, hums, whistles or speaks, that it is *ensounded* (Ingold, 2011: 139).

I enter the code and open the single, plain industrial door. When I pull the handle toward me, a rush of wind carries the scent of wet grain, mold, and Mexican free-tail bat guano. When I throw the switch, fluorescent lights flicker on in the low ceilinged 'lobby' area of the old rice factory. In front of me, a black wall of mysterious electronics, now defunct, once controlled the ferrying of rice around the innumerable silos.

I haul my camera and audio gear over the threshold and into the 'lobby.'

I close the door.

The door on the right leads out of the 'lobby' and into the labyrinthine complex of silos. I move my gear through the door and into the 'center' of the complex. Concrete cylinders rise hundreds of feet into darkness. Portals lead in and out of each silo in an incomprehensible pattern. It is quiet. I am alone.

Outside, it is afternoon and Texas sun. In here, time feels suspended.

This is a place someone might stumble upon in a thousand years and think it's an ancient site for worship. There's an odd sense of ancient-futuristic-apocalyptic religiosity here.

This is my cathedral, now.

My Underworld/Otherworld.

I set up my equipment to film. I point the single camera into the most interesting trio of silos: three in a row with succeeding doorways opening one into the next. A mid-20th century sodium vapour light emits a yellow-green glow at the end of the set of three.

My steps echo with a several second delay.

I am here for the sound.

The single motivation behind this project is to make vocal sound in this cavernous and sonorous space. I am here for the sound my body makes in this space; to reach my body out— beyond its skin and bones and flesh— to reach out with my voice, my *vocality*: the imagined, manifold me that is voice and body, body and voice. Cultural phenomenologist Steven Connor writes of this embodied experience in ‘Violence, Ventriloquism and the Vocalic Body’:

The vocalic body is the idea – which can take the form of dream, fantasy, ideal, theological doctrine or hallucination – of a surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice (2001: 80).

Through improvisation, I *play* the space itself, like an instrument: I touch the space with my vocalic body and feel the *space-as-sound* touch me. My voice echoes and bounces back, amplified by the twenty-foot wide and hundreds-of-feet tall concrete silo cylinders. Through the architecture’s sonority, the sense of my body becomes enormous, like the space itself. My voice encounters the space and effects the perception of my *voice-body-body-voice*. My voice feels huge and towering, and so my body is huge and towering. Through the sonic properties of the silos, I experience the dissolution of space and body.

My vocalic body is transformed.

I become the space.



Video 2: Solo voice experiment at the Silos. Misha Penton. Winter 2017. Video edit: 03:35. Direct link on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/237963262/551de386f5>.

It is late April. In Texas, the rains come. It rains. Hard.

I arrive at the silos to check on the site the day before my first rehearsal with the electric guitarist.

Upon approach, I see water seeping out from below the industrial door and around the base of the adjacent silos.

I open the door.

The silos are flooded: a thin lake spreads through the concrete labyrinth of the towers.

I think to myself, Underworld/Otherworld: 'Lete,' the Greek Underworld lake of oblivion and forgetting...

I panic.

I leave.

I return, wearing galoshes and carrying several fifty-gallon plastic blue trash bins. I position the trash bins under the silos that are oozing water. I put signs on the bins in English and Spanish: DO NO REMOVE/NO QUITAR.

The next day, I meet the guitarist for our first rehearsal with his electric rig. *Electric:* there is water throughout the site. In some places, the water is several inches deep. The guitarist sets up in a remote, dry silo. He plugs in his amplifiers.

I walk through the space, my feet *tap-tap-tapping* and sloshing and dripping through the puddles.

I weave through the maze of silos, vocalising. I am un-amplified. The silos serve as amplifiers for me. I can sing straight up into their cone-like openings and even with the guitar amplified, I am easily heard. I hear the guitar's drones and loops and squeals and sustained tones, and he hears me. We 'talk' to each other through sound, like musicians do. It is a familiar way to communicate and much deeper than words. My experience reiterates composer Tim Hodgkinson's views on improvisation in *Music and the Myth of Wholeness: Toward a New Aesthetic Paradigm*: 'Our different intentions in each moment are generated by our different constitutive listenings to what is happening in the previous moment' (2016: 70). We find our way, together in sound, moment by moment.



Video 3: Duo experiment at the Silos. Misha Penton, voice. George Heathco, guitar. April 2017. Video edit: 01:57. Direct link on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/237962466/5f89b04694>.

Shape and Possibilities

In Umberto Eco's influential *The Open Work*, he writes:

life in its immediacy is not 'openness' but chance. In order to turn this chance into a cluster of possibilities, it is first necessary to provide it with some organization. In other words, it is necessary to choose the elements of

a constellation among which we will then—and only then— draw a network of possibilities (1989: 116).

With this in mind, I hope to 'draw a network of possibilities' with which to shape the work:

1. Direction: I lead the 'game'; or rather, I *shape* the work in real-time. I call this, 'directorial scoring.' Through spoken and nonverbal cues, I set conditions for the work to *happen*. I do not tell collaborators what to 'do.'
2. Poetics: I compose the libretto (poetics/text), and before the first rehearsal with the 'chorus' (the three other vocalisers), we memorise the text. The text evolves in rehearsal, organically, with the four of us together in the space. We may use the words in a loose order, with the beginning and end text more solidly set than the body of the poetics. Over time, the libretto morphs, but not much—I mostly cut and cull words which feel too specific.
3. Score: there is no notated musical score beyond my directorial scoring and libretto.
4. Vocality and Staging: the solo voice and chorus voice parts which are improvised, semi-improvised, devised, and based in the libretto.
5. Concept: my personal artistic aesthetic. This is nebulous, complex, and beyond the scope of this paper, but I might say it is marked by abstraction, expressivity, *bel canto* vocality and vocal techniques borrowed from contemporary theatre practices, as well as a strong, theatrical visual aesthetic based in body relationships in space.
6. Instrumentalists: when the instrumentalists join us for the last rehearsal in the short production period, they 'plug' their improvisations into what the vocalising cast has devised. For the performance, the instrumentalists were in a centrally located silo with their amplifiers and speaker systems dispersed throughout the space.
7. Duration: the work will be 30 minutes. We have no time keeping devices. Through keeping time in rehearsals, the work develops to that length on its

- own. In performance, we clock-out at something like an uncanny 28 minutes.
8. The Silos: the space is a cast member and the primary physical and conceptual container for the work, therefore, all rehearsals must take place inside the space.
 9. *Silence* is an active participant, a cast member.
 10. The whole of the work is a listening game.

The work emerges in the space as we:

Breathe

Walk

Pause

Sigh

Look at each other

Look away

How are we in relationship? Together? Apart?

Are we moving slow? Fast? Both? Neither?

Who is in stillness? Who is not?

Are we standing close to one another? Far away? Who is beside me? Who is isolated?

Am I kneeling? Crouching? Standing? Leaning?

Are we touching? Who is touching whom?

A hand lays on a shoulder

A palm rests on concrete

Whose breath is quiet? Whose audible?

Exhale. Intone. Growl

Can I wait in stillness and silence?

I wail

Whisper

Gasp

Shout

Echo

One word is added

*Then another and another
Another phrase; another fragment
Discard what isn't useful
Take apart the diphthongs
Vowels long. Vowels short
Explode plosives
Consonants crackle, et cetera, et cetera, and so on*

*Our bodies are fleshy and tender, vulnerable
We follow a maze of thresholds, one to the next
We invade the concrete
The silo towers are singular, separated, apart, connected— we make the space whole
We become the space; the space becomes us
We find a way forward, together*



Video 4: Voice Rehearsal at the Silos: Misha Penton, Sherry Cheng, Neil Ellis Orts, Michael Walsh. April 2017. Video edit: 01:49. Direct link on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/237964336/fac355dede>.

Being in space and time with each other is based in the development of awareness and attention, and the emergence, establishment, and transformation of relationships. This way of working allows the performance to emerge through a practice of awareness. These methods are familiar to theatre practitioners trained in improvisational devising techniques influenced by the foundational work of Mary

Overlie's 'Six Viewpoints,' and Anne Bogart and Tina Landau's expanded Viewpoints work. *Threshold's* sonic and physical world emerged in this collaborative, deeply attentive way.

I choose to ask the chorus not to 'sing.' I want their vocalisations to be audible breaths, gasps, whispers, spoken words, and vocal fry(s), and to leave the *bel canto*-esque tone production to me: the *Me* in performance that functions as lightning rod, guide, and focal energetic system, driving and shaping the work in real-time. There is a considerable amount of *allowing* for this guidance to happen on the part of my collaborators, and I trust this to occur due to the specific people involved. The piece develops from an intuitive, instinctive *knowing* that 'simply' *happens* when the 'right' conditions are set. Chance, happenstance, idiosyncrasies and synchronicities in the process and performance are essential to the work's emergence.

In allowing the creative work to reveal itself via its interpersonal relationships, emergent aesthetic properties become native to the process itself: the work feels like it *occurs* on its own, through self-organisation, with me serving as conceptualist. Through the people involved, the work emerges, evolves and changes during the process and, ultimately, dissipates and dissolves. The *people* are the work, not the *work* itself; and as an ensemble, we become guides for the audience. *Threshold* allowed performers and audience to look and listen *together*— to journey together as the work unfolded in the resonant space.



Video 5: *Threshold Dress Rehearsal*. April 30, 2017. Full cast. Video edit: 05:24. Direct link on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/238217935/7ed2a92cea>.

Modularity and Emergence

Composer James Saunders explores the practical, creative, and artistic considerations of modularity in his essay, 'Modular Music.' He writes that a 'compositional, or indeed any, method involving use of modules...would require a number of standardized units and a procedure for fitting them together' (2008: 2). There are conceptual similarities to modularity in my work, such as a number of 'pieces' coming together to form a whole, and a short rehearsal period within which the pieces 'snap' together. However, I'm reticent to call the 'parts' and working processes of a piece like *Threshold*, 'modules,' as they are not meant as building blocks, nor meant for later reuse, however indeterminately, in the sense of a modular work.² I choose the word, 'element,' rather than 'module' or 'standardised unit,' due to its association with natural processes.³

The elements of *Threshold* overlap and are intertwined and enmeshed with the possibilities which shape the work that I list above. *Threshold's* elements include: the libretto— a composed component which pre-dates the rehearsal period; the solo and group vocality— fluid, semi-improvised and based in the poetics; the devised group staging; the improvising instrumentalists; and the architecture of the space which serves as the most 'fixed' of the work's elements and the most significant 'given' of the 'game.' These components form additional 'sub-elements' in their relationship to each other, multiplying the 'modules': solo voice and chorus; individual vocalist to individual vocalist; voice(s) and guitar; voice(s) and percussion; guitar and percussion; body(ies) and site; staging and site; et cetera. In addition, the space evokes modularity in the design of the facility as it possesses many 'thresholds'— an obvious physical example of thematic material.

Threshold came together from pre-conceptualised parts rather than pre-constructed modules. An element of the work, such as the guitarist spontaneously interacting with my vocals, becomes a *conceptual* module— it is an improvisatory

² See Saunders for an exploration of closed and open modular systems as well as temporal modularity in music composition.

³ Eco and Saunders also use the word, 'element,' in describing aspects of open works.

component *within* a larger improvisatory and devised process, with the ‘final’ outcome, as desired, unpredictable. Rather than forming a cohesive whole from pre-made building blocks, this approach feels akin to biological processes like tending a garden of emergent forms. Furthermore, there is a tension between the biological elements (human/embodied/ephemeral) and the architectural (site/concrete/nonhuman). Through this friction, there is a sense that the human cast ‘invades’ the architectural fixity of the site with an emergent and embodied vocality/ephemerality, like vines overrunning an abandoned building.

Threshold emerged into a work which is repeatable, if not *reproducible*, in that the work consistently held its visual and sonic aesthetics/characteristics as well as its movement patterns, but it was not exactly the same from rehearsal to rehearsal, to filming, to recording, to performance.

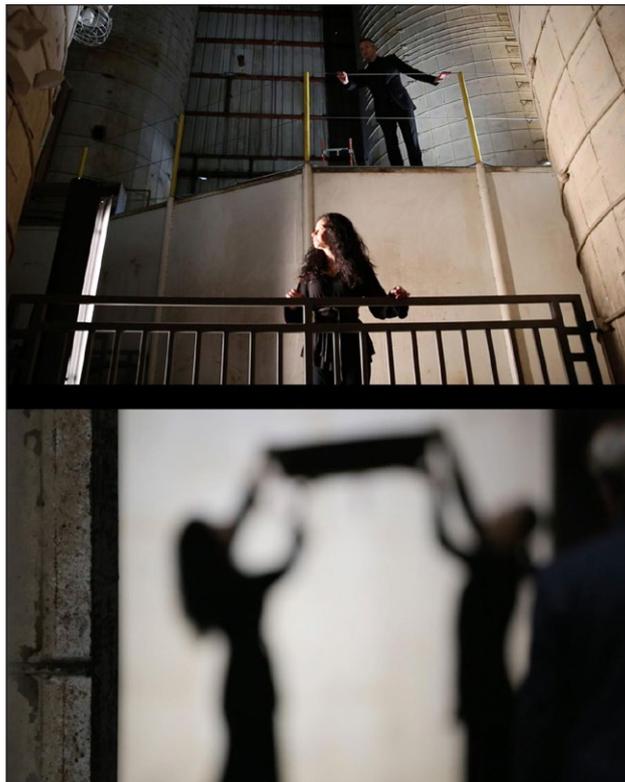


Image 2: *Threshold* Dress Rehearsal. April 30, 2017. Top: Michael Walsh and Misha Penton. Bottom, L-R: Misha Penton, Sherry Cheng. Photo by Casares/Nickerson.

Iterativity and (re)Purposing

My current methods of making work came about, in part, from the practical desire to produce complex theatrical performance pieces without the heavy burden of production resources and pre-production time investment. Practicality dictates an approach to work-making that is improvisatory, devised, and in some cases, modular. These approaches yield subsequent iterations and (re)mediated works which offer an opportunity for increased engagement beyond the short-lived, resource-gobbling (thus impractical) live performance.

The commitment to practicality is another concept I borrow from a modular approach. Saunders cites Anna Ericsson and Gunnar Erixon's volume, *Controlling Design Variants: Modular Product Platforms*, which outlines the benefits of modularity in the production industry, including 'the more creative benefits such an approach provides: greater flexibility, improved quality, and independent development of a product and production system' (2008: 3). If modules, sections, pieces, or elements of a project can come together quickly— whether from pre-planning or improvisational skills— this 'greater flexibility' in the creation of work offers an opportunity to ease the burden associated with traditional production approaches.

Repurposing, versioning, and multi-forms manifest as the many (re)mediated traces of the work from pre-production media and writings, to performance and post-production archival materials such as the forthcoming, separately filmed, seven-minute music video of *Threshold*. These iterations spiral out into the world, largely via the internet. The works exist as stand-alone, single pieces for an audience who may have no prior knowledge of the project; or they may exist as they do here, in edited versions which offer a contextual engagement:

Each version should therefore be musically self-sufficient and avoid the requirement to have experienced other versions. So for some listeners the sole version they have heard is the piece, for others the knowledge of the project transforms their view, while for a smaller group of listeners, hearing more than one version allows them to contextualize this knowledge through experience: they can make actual comparisons between versions (Saunders, 2008: 35–6).

Now, *Threshold* exists only in its (re)mediated traces. Alongside and beyond *Threshold*, my other performance and media pieces are connected in a meandering, creative trajectory.

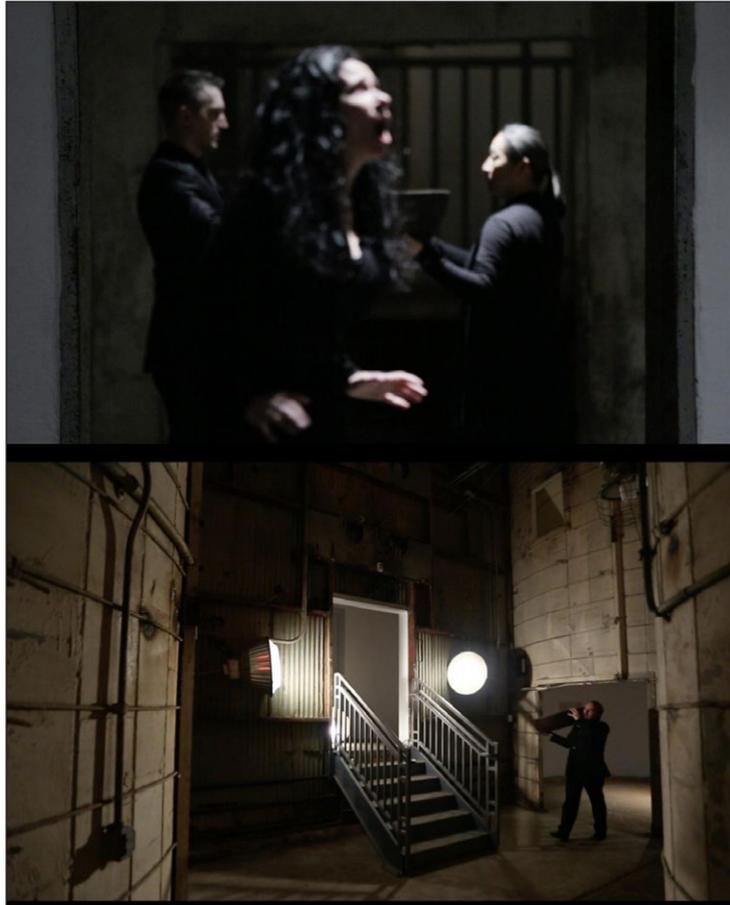


Image 3: *Threshold* Dress Rehearsal. April 30, 2017. Top, L-R: Michael Walsh, Misha Penton (foreground), Sherry Cheng. Bottom: Neil Ellis Orts. Photo by Casares/Nickerson.

Outro

Perhaps iterativity, modularity, and repurposing are manifestations of an ever-disconnected culture? How can we make art possible despite our current societal conditions *un*-conducive to the work? What ways of working emerge from this

adversity? One possibility is to make the *making* of the work as 'easy' and *un*-time consuming as possible while preserving its artistic complexity, depth, and integrity. Regarding adversity, I will close with the wisdom of guitarist Robert Fripp, 'Turn a seeming disadvantage to your advantage. The greater the seeming disadvantage, the greater the possible advantage' (1999).



Image 4: *Threshold* Performance. April 30, 2017. Top, L-R: audience member, George Heathco, guitar. Bottom, L-R: Michael Walsh, Misha Penton, Neil Ellis Orts, Sherry Cheng. Photo by Casares/Nickerson.



Image 5: *Threshold* Performance. April 30, 2017. Top, L-R: Misha Penton, Sherry Cheng (kneeling), Neil Ellis Orts. Bottom, L-R: Sherry Cheng, Michael Walsh. Photo by Casares/Nickerson.

Other Iterations of *Threshold* (selected)

Music Video, forthcoming: the audio was recorded as a studio project post-performance. I created the music for the video through a modular approach, using the individual recorded audio tracks as raw material to craft the final mix. This work was filmed during the production period.



Sound File 1: Vocal Audio Fragment: An audio work which I recorded and composed through vocal improvisation. Individual tracks of this work were triggered via the percussionist's electronic set-up in performance. Misha Penton, soprano, concept, text, recording.

Direct link on Soundcloud: <https://soundcloud.com/misha-penton/threshold-fragment>.



Sound File 2: Live In-Studio Performance of *Threshold* at Houston Public Media. Misha Penton, soprano, concept, text. George Heathco, guitars. Luke Hubley percussion. Recorded by Todd Hulslander.

Direct link on Soundcloud: <https://soundcloud.com/misha-penton/threshold>.

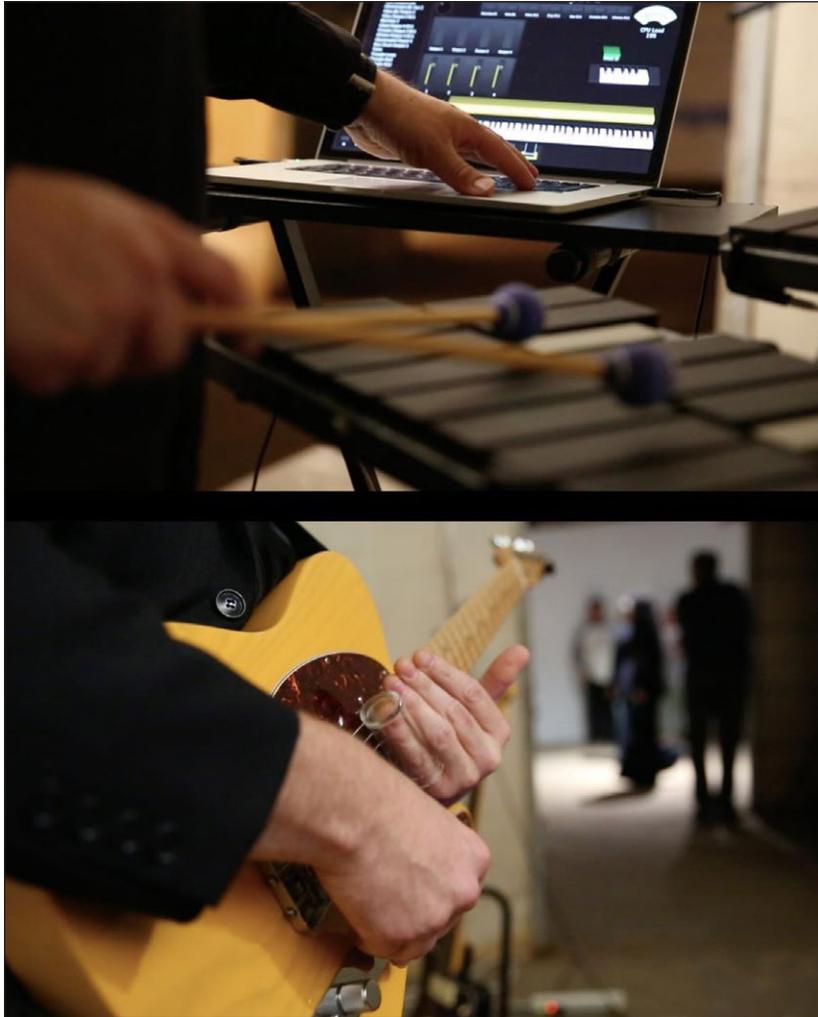


Image 6: *Threshold* Performance. April 30, 2017. Top: Luke Hubley, percussion. Bottom: George Heathco, guitar. Photo by Casares/Nickerson.

Technical

Cameras:

Misha Penton, process videos. Dress rehearsal and performance videos and photos:

Raul Casares, Dave Nickerson. Misha Penton, editor.

Electronic Equipment in Performance:

Two guitar amplifiers with one-hundred foot cables for the electric guitar and guitar looping rig. Four powered speakers for the electronic percussion rig; two sets of

speakers in spaced-out pairs on either end of the silos site using one-hundred foot cables; 4 channels emitting from the electronic percussion set-up (Apple MainStage music application).

All ensemble members have given permission for their work to appear here, as well as in subsequent media versions and written contextualisations of *Threshold*.

Author Information

Misha Penton is a contemporary opera singer, experimental vocal composer, media artist, performance creator and director. Her work examines liminal performative spaces, transitory symbology, and personal and collective mythos at the intersections of classical and extended vocal techniques, postopera theatre, and media creation. Professional affiliations include Houston Grand Opera, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Dallas Museum of Art, Menil Collection Houston, and University of Houston Center for Creative Work. Recent projects include *Anecdote of the Spirit*, an experimental work created for the Rothko Chapel in Houston; *Threshold*, a site specific experimental postopera created for the cavernous old rice factory, The Silos at Sawyer Yards in Houston; and *Quatre (Mallarmé)*, a new music collaboration with fellow composer Chris Becker inspired by the French avant-garde. Upcoming projects: *The Lighthouse*, a collaborative opera project with composer Brent Fariss; the music video release of *Threshold*; and *The Medusa Project*, a postopera solo work. Misha is based in Houston, Texas and is a doctoral candidate in music at Bath Spa University, UK and a member of the BSU Open Score Lab. mishapenton.com.

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Competing Interests

Dani Ploeger is a member of the Editorial Board for BST Journal. The board are not involved with editing content and Perspectives contributions are not peer reviewed.

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