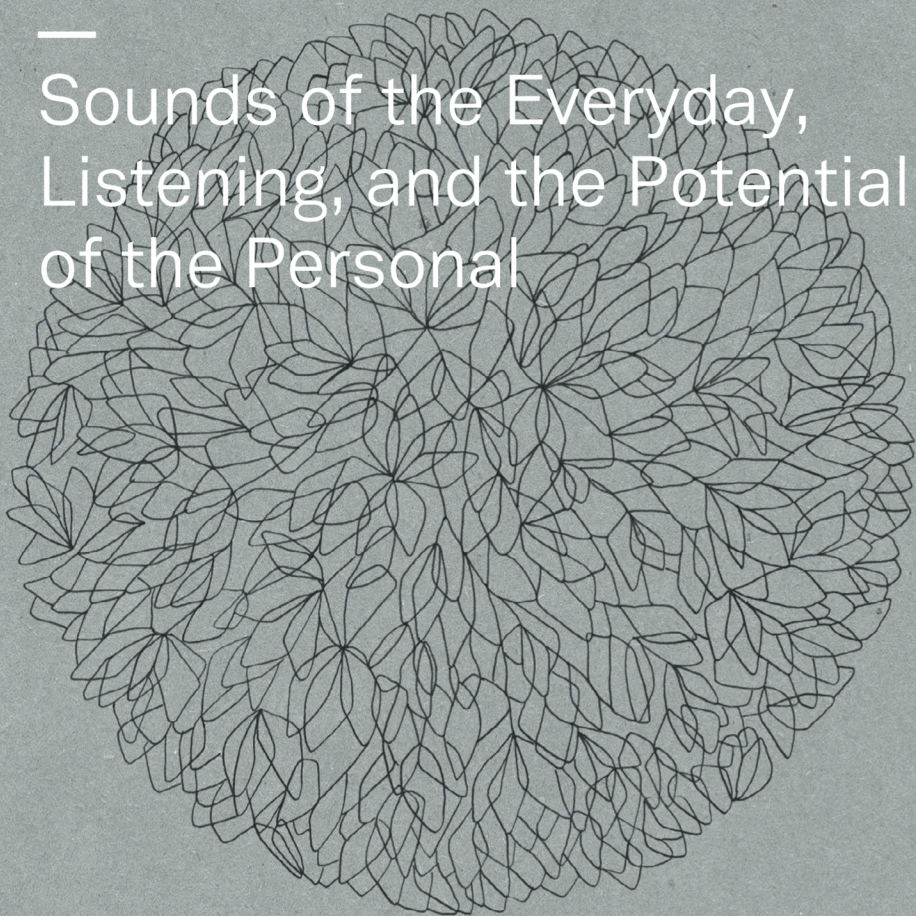

Bumping Into A Chair While Humming

Sounds of the Everyday,
Listening, and the Potential
of the Personal



Ezekiel Honig

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anticipato

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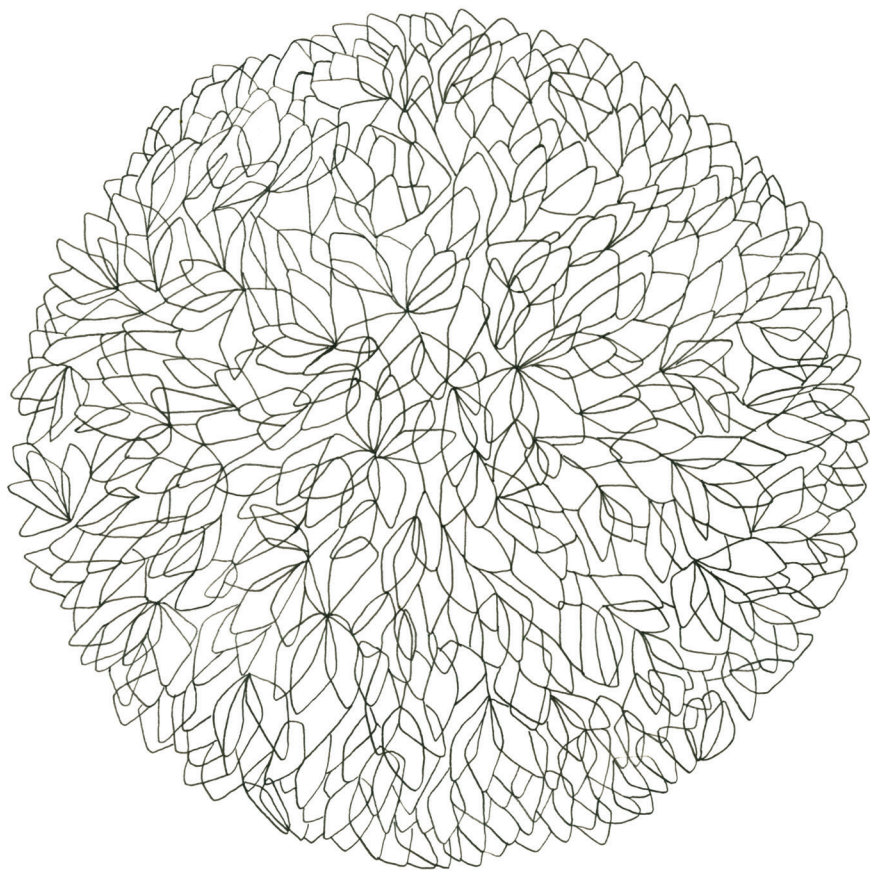
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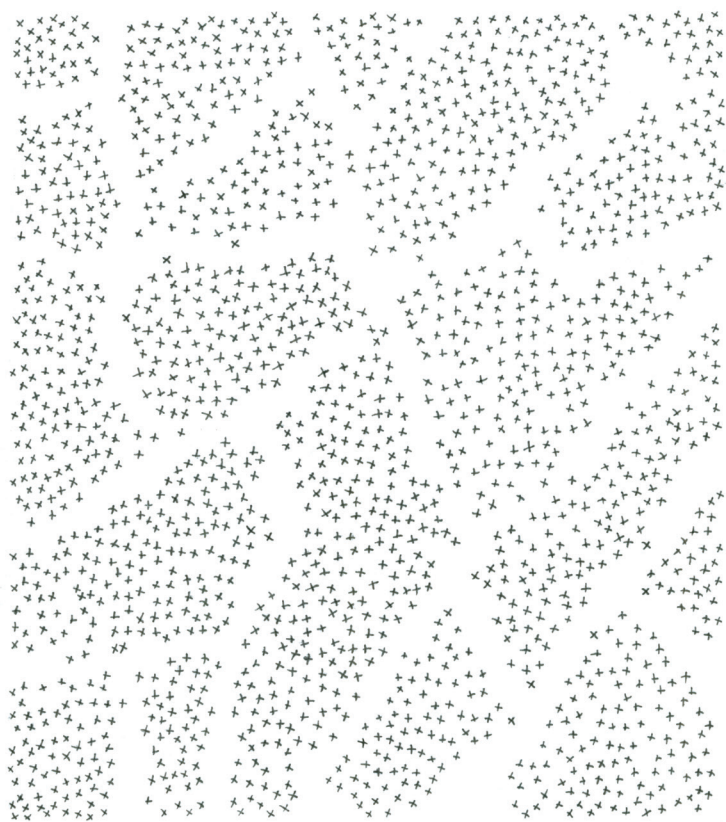
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Introduction / Listening

“Bumping into a chair” describes the unexpected, mundane nature of sound. A chair represents the average, everyday object you find in many domestic, indoor spaces. “Bumping into” accesses the idea of accidents, or, more to the point, happy accidents – those events that you did not plan but recognize for their potential when they do occur, for inspiring an idea, or for providing a sound that is useful in your composition.

“Humming” touches on the idea of a personal music, a melodic concept that emanates from an intimate space but can be heard outside your head if you choose. It is not strict. It is not necessarily loud. It is not stuck to predefined lines. It is meant to be improvised and embellished. It is meant for one’s individual path through the world, though it can be shared with others.

The third aspect of this phrase, which is arguably most important, is the word “while,” which represents the combination of these elements – the collaboration between the personal, the mundane, the consciousness stirring, the objects in the space around you, the accidental, and the sense of music being whatever you are hearing at that moment. The taking apart of the potential in the everyday combines with the intimate, personal experience of moving through it.

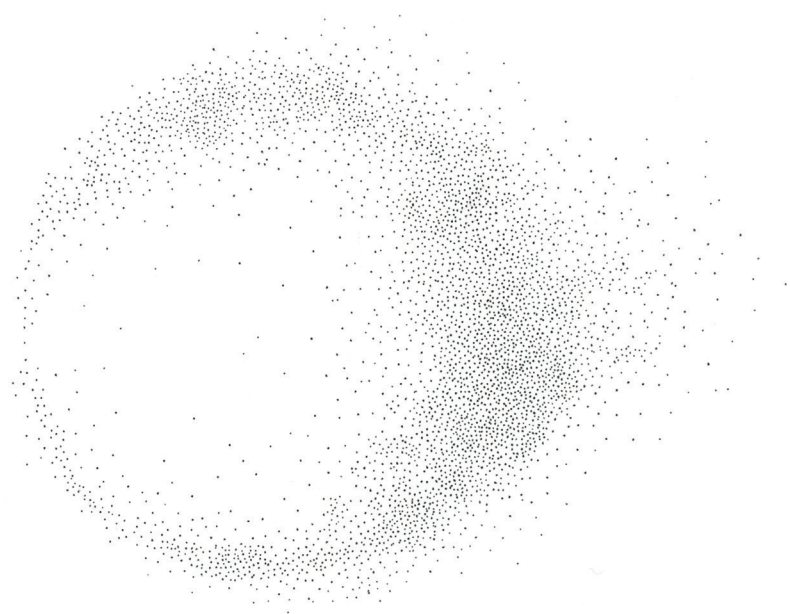
In the following pages we'll look at these individual pieces, put them back together, and further personalize the already personal. Though this process can apply to many creative practices, here it applies to sound.

Listening At the heart of everything explored here is the simple request to listen. Listen to the world around you - the air, the objects, the people, the ambience, the nature and city, loudness and "silence," sound organized and disorganized. Listen. We become so concerned with what is in front of us that we forget about what is around us, the degree to which our hearing communicates the contours of our world. On the most basic level, the existence referred to us by our ears is far more vast than that observed with the other senses. We listen to things we can't see, which gives us an outline of what is happening around that corner or far off in the distance. Both an ocean and a traffic-laden highway are heard before they are seen or touched (though admittedly smell does travel quite a ways).

If you reinvent how you listen it will affect everything. It will change your conception of music, but it will also change how you move through the world, how you observe, how you react, how you think. Listening is an oft-overlooked means of navigating, and consciously giving it greater importance should open an avenue of perception that may have been underused. You may find that listening differently helps you to see differently, to find connections between people, things, events that were not previously apparent. Focusing on more

layers of your audible, physical background will likely lead to creative inspiration more often, when you're not even thinking about it, which is the best time for such moments. If cause and effect governs, paying attention to the world in a different way changes your behavior, which in turn affects other people's behavior, outcomes, the course of events, relationships, everything. The effects will reverberate.

I hope to steer you in a direction of thinking about sound and towards inspiration, but the greater hope is that this mode of creativity spreads out to alter a greater portion of your life, where the artistic practice and general existence overlap and you lose sight of where one begins and the other ends.



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Incidental Sound As Music

Sound is intuitive and associative, dream-like and consciousness stirring. In many ways it is even more visual than visuals, because when you're looking at something you are seeing that thing, but if you're listening, especially with no visual accompaniment, you easily imagine pictures in your mind's eye, with varying directions and results. Even with concrete sounds that are easily identifiable, you can still fill in the blanks of what is occurring around them, or ignite a memory that has its own set of images, which are abstractions of the real experience. This blurriness adds new elements to what could otherwise seem so grounded, allowing a balancing act of connectedness and infinite openness, of reality that veers off into different possible strands, extensions of what could be.

Edgard Varese coined a re-definition of music as “organized sound” (Varese 1), a concept later popularized further by John Cage, who wrote, “If this word ‘music’ is sacred and reserved for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century instruments, we can substitute a more meaningful term: organization of sound” (Cage 2).

It is with this sense of listening that we consider a different path towards an idea of what music can be, and how to construct it. This is nothing new. To relay one of infinite examples: every time you walk down a flight of steps and recognize the rhythm you're making,

you are realizing the possibilities, and how our brains want everything to be music, to be organized. When we pay attention to it, we hear this patterned version of the world happening around us. We hear the music that we create unknowingly, or that we pass by in our immediate environment. Just as we lean in the direction of organizing our lives into a story, of attempting to make sense of it, we do the same with the audio around us, if we allow ourselves to pay attention. We recognize sound, which can become music, and perhaps lose a need for these separate terms in the process.

The Possibilities in the Mundane A wooden table leg dragging along the floor, a plastic bottle being dropped from five feet up, a box of discarded objects being shaken and rummaged through... These are all seemingly mundane sounds (and sound sources), which may contain a great deal of intimate moments, of meditation, of finding the thought process in “doing nothing.” Through listening and editing, these sounds open up a world of possibilities of percussion and texture, solitary material-scapes and melodic rhythms of the everyday.

Why use seemingly incidental objects for the creation of music? People have different motivations, but to begin with, it's an original source – a truly original source – not of an instrument which others can play, or of a sample from a record, but sound which has never existed before, and will never exist again, save for when you make it and the recording you will have of it. The objects and

the spaces are not so incredibly original, but it is the way in which the mundane is used – the sounds you might make with the innocuous, or what you pull out of a recording – which is the truly original. Taking objects that you use constantly and creating sounds with them that you either never hear them make, or that you ignore in the average passing of a day, can bring new life to your work – not just in the output, but in your own process of making. The contrast of using the everyday to make sound that is meant to be organized opens us up to a different level of awareness of our surroundings, which changes our experience of moving through the world, for if your attention is different, how you process stimuli is different, which means your actions and reactions will be different.

These means of designing sound can work with, or instead of, traditional instrumental sources or voice. They can add a novel element to pop music as easily as they offer ingenuity to music in the experimental realms. It personalizes the work in a different way, by adding a step to the process – an individual's artisanal working out of sound, a sense of playfulness, a handmade quality, which retains a sense of the physical world within the digital product. This is a different phenomenon than playing instruments, as the objects or spaces in question aren't meant for musical purposes and there is no handbook on how to "play" them. Bricolage is an appropriate term here, a French word that refers to making something with the material at one's disposal – assembling a new thing from pieces

that aren't necessarily meant for that purpose but are appropriated for it. This is a vital concept, of finding new uses for objects and spaces, of exploring the possibilities in the world immediately around you, for sound art purposes. We should be encouraged to think of the sound around us as sample material, that which is free, owned by no one, and completely at our fingertips. It takes no formal training, though it does take time and practice, like anything else, to hone your craft and find your own voice.

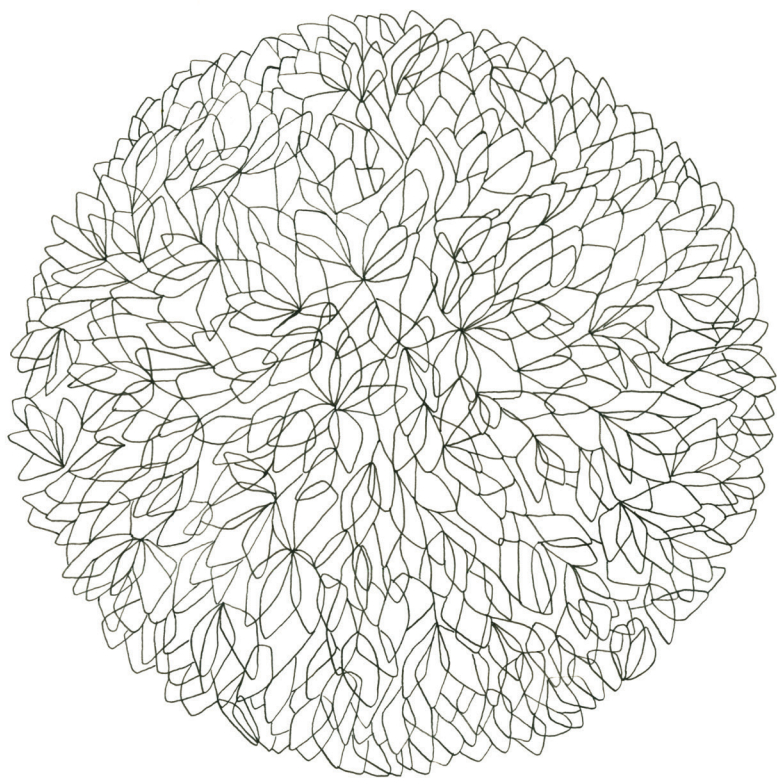
Drums & Tones Percussion seems to come naturally. Any sound can be taken out of its surroundings and used to compose a new rhythm. If you cut off enough of the beginning and end of a sound it can be used as a sort of drum replacement. It might lack the specific boom and heft of a classic kick drum, but it could easily stand in for one, or become a snare, hi-hat, or undisclosed percussive noise. The trick here is to edit the sounds correctly for your purpose. Where you edit them determines the feel of the rhythm of the whole, since that whole is composed of these individual pieces. You are essentially creating these sounds by taking them out of their existing container, the larger recording from which they originate. They are entirely determined by you and how you hear them before they exist in their new form. You can make a lot of headway in finding what you are looking for by simple trial and error, playing with endpoints of a sound edit. Each of these individual choices affects the direction of an arrangement, the feel of a rhythmic phrase. The more time you spend

on editing, in searching for sounds within the larger recording, the better you will be at knowing what you're looking for, finding it, and creating the rhythm and tone that is your ideal.

Melody Melodic phrases can come out of the material as well. One can map, or send, any sound to a keyboard (or virtual keyboard in a digital audio workstation such as Logic, Ableton Live, Pro Tools, etc.), where the original can be edited, stretched, or otherwise processed to bring it closer to a basis for melodic progressions. This can take some trial and error, but there is much discovery that can happen in the process, where what you thought was a book dragging along the floor or a helicopter flying overhead can become a note for constructing a melodic phrase. Playing with the edit points, and other parameters, such as sustain, decay, or reverb, can help with creating a sound that has more fluidity and possibility of becoming a new instrument. The duration of the sound you're looking for guides you in the process of selecting the original from which to construct something new.

Balance I'd like to stress that these are just ideas, and if an idea doesn't work for you, you should not use it. Harnessing the sound around you does not preclude the use of more traditional musical sources. The best results tend to be in a balance of these areas. When a candy wrapper can yield hi-hat and snare sounds and the street offers muffled crowd chatter and a far-off hum of industry, and these are put in the midst of piano

and trumpet (or any acoustic instrument of choice), the interplay can create something completely other without sacrificing the wealth of beauty in tools that have been tried and tested over many years. There is no need to withdraw from tradition merely for the sake of modernity. They are meant to balance with each other.



What Are We Listening For

Listening is an incredibly personal topic because it relates to how our brains work, what our cultural context is, what we want our work to be, our values, our experiences... Regardless of the subjectivity of the activity, it is still worth delving into to feel out a sense of what can be applied collectively and how to approach the sound around us.

Simply put, one needs to listen attentively. This seems obvious, and yet needs to be said explicitly. If you record outside you capture so many moments worth using that could not have been anticipated. I find it is usually something small that catches my attention, an instance where sounds align to produce an interesting effect or something that acts as a good hook for a track. Perhaps the acoustics of a particular street make the sound of a footstep combined with the jostling of a bag of groceries become a new object that inspires you and is something you didn't plan or imagine. Maybe your ear is caught by the hum of a plane as it veers further away, with the tail of the sound being very much a natural effect of distance. Even the simplicity of how a crowd interacts with itself can be a jarring and opportune moment that you find in a recording.

One can only discover these gems by sifting through the sound, listening carefully (probably several times) and hearing what is there with a particular perspective. That

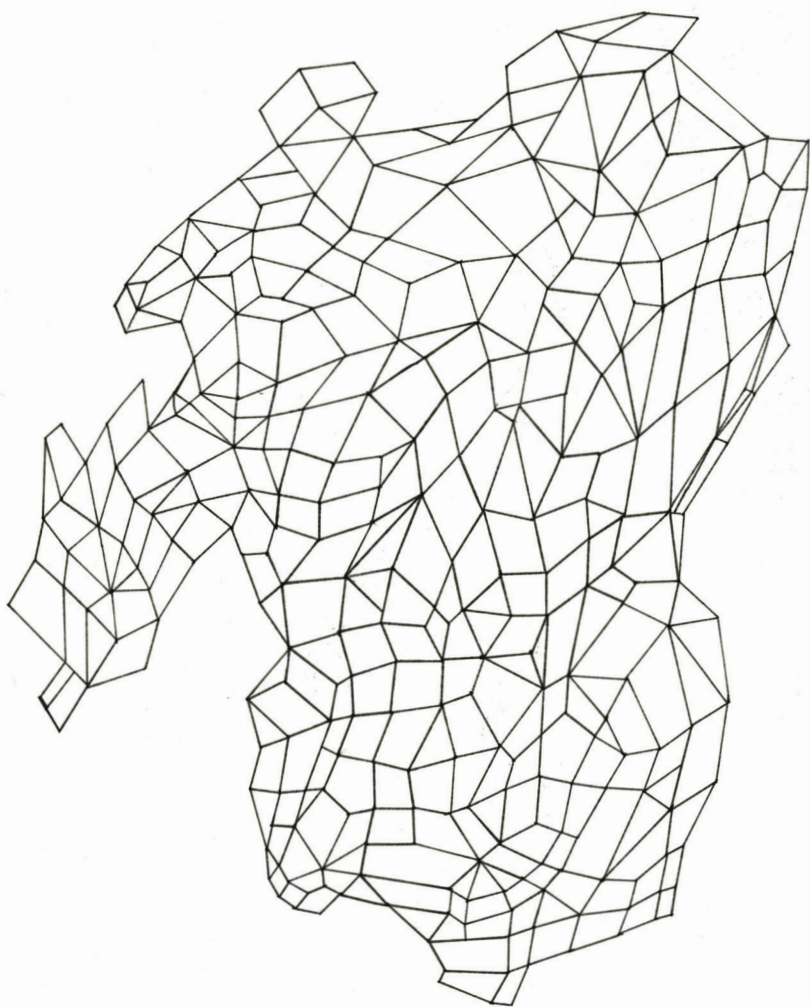
perspective needs to be developed, just like anything else. You might need to work on figuring out what you're listening for, why you're listening for it, what excites you, or you might already have a clear picture in your head of what that is. If you are searching for a particular type of sound for a particular piece of work, that is a built-in guide, but one should nonetheless be ready for the unexpected, be available to hear anything that might not be for the current purpose but could possibly inspire a new one.

This personal, individual listening perspective is the core of finding your sound. It determines the choices you make in editing a recording and assists with finding the tools you will use, based on a cultivated auditory sensibility. What you make a track out of determines its shape in a literal way. It is comprised of the pieces used to complete it. When building one's perspective it is essential to recognize how and why you are gravitating to certain sounds and how those sounds then alter your conception of the material. The feedback sequence begins with your individual viewpoint, which in turn affects the perception of the sounds that originate from said viewpoint, and then helps to make the choices needed through the multiple steps in the process of creating music.

You can influence yourself, while finding a place for the influence of others, and build a personal mythology of sorts, an infrastructure, which braces all your work, regardless of how you choose to express it. It is akin

to a sonic manifesto, or in a less formal way, a basic understanding of what comprises your style, what makes your track sound like your track. This is not meant to be an easy or quick process, and frankly, it's not an absolute requirement. (There is always something to be said for doing something that has been done over and over, but doing it extremely well.)

Developing a mode of working and a personal style brings with it the pitfalls of copying oneself too often, or sticking to a predetermined blueprint, which can lead to stagnation. One can combat this by using the groundwork that's been laid out as a base, as a thing to jump off of and use as a reference point from which to move forward. Straying from the comfort zone is important as a growth exercise, even if strengthening that comfort zone was initially difficult and the instinct may be to remain within that particular set of self-determined boundaries. Finding what you are listening for is the greatest strength in reevaluating your work, and, if you have built a signature sound, there is always room to add more character to it, more wrinkles and nuance, to remain the same while always being different.



Hidden Expressions of Objects

Using the sound around you, and sounds you make with various non-instruments, lends itself to a different kind of emotional expression, where the objects themselves translate meaning. We are listening for the poetry contained in the mundane and pulling it out of these objects and their individual characters. Because of where they originated, the sounds are imbued with a personal association, which I believe comes through in the work because it affects what you do and how you do it. For example, you may use the sound of a blender or of the street outside your home, but not as some sort of novelty. You made these sounds in your experience of the physical world, and they cannot be found anywhere else in quite the same way. Even if one can find the sound of a blender or of street noise on a sample CD or on a different day in a different place, it won't be the same one, and you know that while recording, editing, processing, and arranging these sounds; you are building a relationship with them. Regardless of whether the average listener notices the difference, the producer's awareness of where the sounds came from, the surrounding associations, and what the experience felt like, translates itself into the work.

Even if an existing association is not overt or on a completely conscious layer, the act of making sounds attaches a personality to them. However self-referential

it may be, working with the material, the act of producing the piece, initiates its own memories, and becomes an experience that is communicated within itself.

What is this experience of making that is translated into the composition? The experience of the day, of the process, the mood you were in at the moment of recording. What occurred on that street, what was seen, what reminded you of a past experience or a possible future – this is all communicated to the listener, even though it may be in the subtext rather than the foreground. The experience of making adds more to the work than can be sufficiently predicted. It begins a process which is ambiguous and can take many directions, because it's based on mood and emotion and exploration that one may not be aware of even while it's happening. It taps into your psychology without thinking about it.

You're finding new connections, trying combinations of objects and using them in unintentional ways, tapping out odd rhythms and pulling out latent textures. Perhaps you're using a book that you've read many times, or a favorite shirt, or a toy from childhood. Perhaps you've recorded an experience while traveling or simply a walk with a friend or a significant other. Documenting it in this way – and listening later – changes the experience, changes the memory of it, and creates a new feedback loop of original experience, reflecting on it, and that reflection then colors the initial memory, which is reflected back by the recording, and so on.

Similar to how a photograph is a section of a scene, a choice the photographer made to not include what is outside that particular frame, a recording cuts out the images and recasts a new visual memory, combining what you think you remember with new pictures conjured by the audio document. Memory is faulty at best, but a recording of the audio can't be argued with. It is what it is. The ambiguity comes into play if you attempt to piece together what was actually occurring at that moment. The sound is the sound, but it leaves space for interpretation about the images and events. You are left with this amalgam of your memory of the moment and what you think you hear when you listen to the recording. This new perspective will add to the supposed memory and put the scene in a new light, where alternate versions of reality become one and the truth lies in the sound itself, which becomes the only element that is truly concrete, influencing your understanding of the moment, even if it is only part of the story.

While listening over and over changes your perspective on both the recording and the memories of the recorded moment, editing changes it even more. Editing, rewriting the experience, reconfiguring pieces of it into tools for a musical work, affects both the impressions of the initial recording and the current artistic practice. You pore over the sonic representation of a moment to the point where that focus turns into the re-experiencing of that moment through the prism of the present day. This changes

the music you make as well as your memories of these moments in life. It inserts the musical experience into the life experience and intertwines them so that they complement each other as pieces of a whole rather than contrast with each other as separate entities.

A Personal Example My father was an economics professor. A few years back I found a copy of a book review he wrote, which I hadn't seen before, and I held onto it. Eventually, I thought about how using that particular set of papers to make sounds for inclusion in a track would likely have a greater emotional effect on me than any random collection of the same matter. I thought it would be interesting in my process to feel like I was including a piece of him in it, even though it was dispersed among physical material that had no discernible difference from any other collection of pages. I knew the difference, and I knew it would change the experience and inevitably change what I made.

I used the pages to make sounds, ruffling them, rubbing them against each other, dropping the stack on a shelf. This recording yielded many percussion sounds and odd interstitial bits. As anticipated, knowing the sounds came from an object that contained an intense personal connection by sheer nature of its author affected how I worked with them, what I was thinking about, what other sounds I included. This influenced my direction, steered choices in melody and arrangement, sound and space, if for no other reason than the weight those initial sounds carried for me, the awareness of what I was

working with. It made me think of a recent past, bent the mood, helped the melodic elements coalesce in line with tunes, which, I honestly realized only in hindsight, were reminiscent of melodies I heard in childhood, even if they were heavily interpreted through my current perspective.

It is often difficult to pinpoint exactly how the emotional association influences the production, for it can be incredibly specific in some instances or incredibly diffused in a complex overlapping with other experiential and cultural associations, where a one-to-one ratio from audio-induced memory to decision-making does not exist. There is nonetheless an interaction playing a part in the ongoing process of making choices and edging towards completing a piece. Even if one can figure out, retroactively, exactly what was happening in his or her thinking, it would still be the product of multiple moments. When producing this particular song, for example, I may have made these real-world connections and allowed them to seep into it, but the eventual result originated from the sounds themselves.

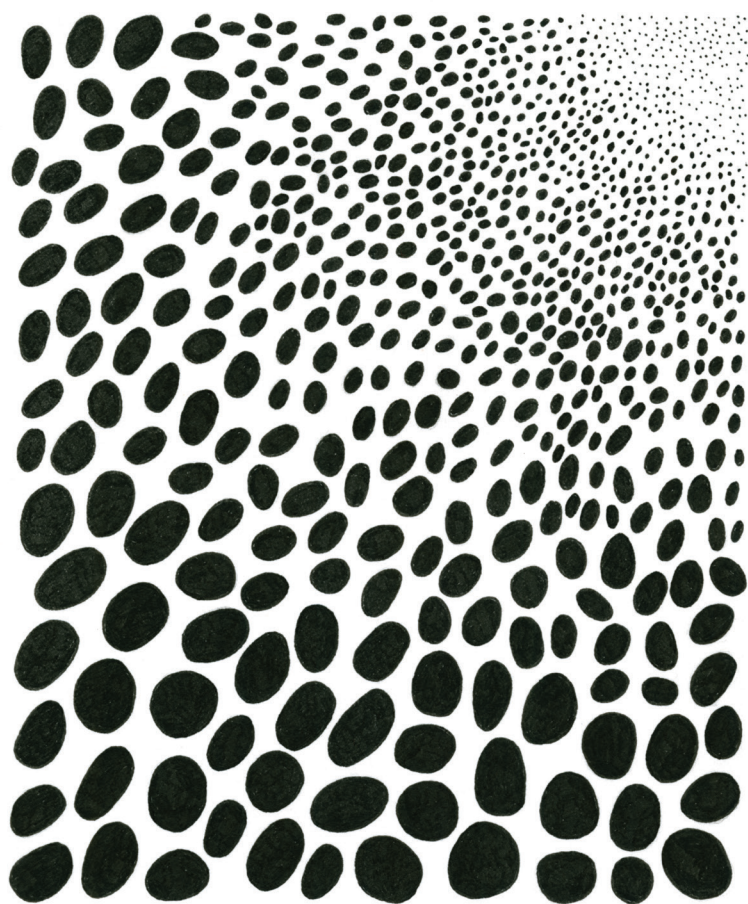
Sounds and their related associations set up a process, determining where the overall work will go. Each decision creates the situation in which the next one is made. Each choice narrows the playing field of what the next one is likely to be. Once you make enough of these choices the production begins to have its own identity. It gains some distance from its sources, but it needs to be remembered that those initial source associations set the stage, take steps towards a certain angle, and

without that beginning the notion of what the future choices would be is completely different. This leads to the self-referential flow, where sound, the source, and its association initiates an emotional process, which affects what is being worked on, and in turn the experience of working on it lends the material a new association.

As I was working with these sounds, I found they became themselves, no longer mere audible remnants of paper and no longer solely containers of a specific emotional thread. I note that they became themselves because I began to identify them as sounds I had been working with, which came from a source that I chose and had in the back of my mind, but they were now turning into things connected to that source, rather than being defined by it. I was keenly aware of the fact that I used those papers to make sounds because of the connection to my father, and how that affected my approach to the track, but once going down that path, I was too close to the material to consider the sounds as anything but what they were in that focused perspective - pieces to be manipulated and arranged into a new whole. I had spent more time with these sounds after they had been recorded and edited than I had while making them with the source objects, so they now defined themselves by the activity and processing they had experienced, as opposed to only their origin.

It is possible to balance the two aspects of the sonic relationship – where it came from and where one

brought it – by holding the spectrum together in one’s consciousness, retaining the depth of the multiple characters of a sound in a manner that benefits the music. Case in point, while finishing and mixing this track, I still kept thinking of it in terms of where it began, and how that led to a specific space and trajectory, listening to the shuffling edits made with the pages of a book review written by my father. Yet, simultaneously, I was listening carefully for the nuances of frequencies and sonic balance, considering the degree to which certain sounds should come to the forefront or play a supporting role, how the specifics of an effect on an individual sound might alter the entire feel of the piece, and ultimately how the origin and destination of each sound had to work together with the organization of all of them. Simply put, sounds need to be sounds, in addition to being the result of materials that remind one of multi-layered experience. Constantly recognizing both is a benefit to oneself and the finished work.



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Editing

There are endless permutations and directions that can be explored with the same raw materials. Editing is the tool that allows you to do this. It allows you to rewrite the story of the moment in the recording. Putting different places adjacent to each other, or on top of each other as different layers in an arrangement is as simple as a few clicks of a button. The lack of a requirement for sequential linearity, which is allowed by looking at an audio waveform or an arrangement on a screen - taking it apart, moving pieces around, cutting out individual seconds and leaving the rest - offers the ease and flexibility to construct a world on your own terms, governed only by the limits imposed by the raw material and your decision-making process.

If you imagined a scene when listening to a recording, whether it's a memory of the actual moment or a new set of visualizations, when isolating pieces of that sound, or cutting and pasting parts of it onto each other, you will inevitably change the pictures in your head as the sound changes. You will see differently because you hear differently.

That car driving past doesn't make sense for your piece, so you take it out. The wind through the hallway had a bit too much information in the higher frequency ranges, so you filter it. That bump against the door makes the perfect kick drum so you grab just that instance in the

recording. You're building a world in the most basic sense, but more importantly, you're building a series of emotions. You're taking what was there, what happened in real time, and reworking it into what serves your purpose, into what creates the experience you want to make. Editing is the tool at your disposal.

This goes hand-in-hand with looking/listening closer, finding the hidden moments that can easily be overlooked, pulling out the latent possibilities, and generally offering oneself a chance to consider the sound differently. To get close up to the sound and play with where the edit begins and ends opens it up in a new way, and reminds us how drastically different a change can occur from what seems like a small extension or reduction of time. Moving an edit point of an audio waveform a fraction of a second to the left or right (i.e. earlier or later) changes the rhythm of the sound and can take something that felt unusable and turn it into something inspiring. Where a sound ends and begins, how it feels, whether it stops on a hard cut or is allowed to fade out, determines the relationship of each sound to its surroundings. What might seem disposable at first can turn into a focal point for your work after inspecting it closer and experimenting with the edit. The more one practices, the easier it is to recognize.

When you record, whether it is in a public space or within the home, the resulting recording is a palette from which to pull. It is there to play with, to search through, to take what you need and leave what you don't. It is ripe

with possibility – dependent on what you're looking for, how you want to use it, and the direction you're moving towards. If you're searching for a random percussive sound, you might find it. If you're looking for a busy atmospheric background you might find that. Potential is the essential point. It is the beginning of everything. You don't know what you'll find, but if you recognize the potential in a sound, in a source, in a movement, you at least create the circumstances whereby you have tools to play with. You allow the situation to exist, to take shape, to form itself into something complete. It is easy to write something off as not fitting, or as not being the right "thing," and sometimes it just isn't, but when you develop your own sensibilities and your individual conception of sound you will begin to more easily recognize the materials which may add value, which may help you fulfill your vision, and perhaps change it in the process.



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Experimenting With Rhythm

All sounds have rhythm. That is a driving force behind structuring music out of the everyday. The tools you have, the recorded sounds, already have a rhythm before you work with them. You get to approach this beginning and shape and rearrange it, but the basis is there to recognize. The overlap of editing, recording, and simply listening is identifying sonic possibilities inside a larger object. Sound sculpting is an oft-used term, and as overused as it may be, it is with good reason. You are cutting away what is unnecessary in order to reveal what should remain. The more you practice listening and honing your style, the better you will be at identifying these moments, at hearing what is waiting to be discovered, and using negative space to create the forward-facing aspects of your sound.

It is this removal, this deletion, which creates the space in which a sound sits, and the interval of time between each sound creates the rhythm between them. It can be compared to typography – just as the container of negative space holds a letter and determines its relationship to the letters around it, so too does the space around a sound determine its interaction with the sounds around it. The fact that one can look at a sound (the waveform) on a screen and visualize these spatial relationships makes the analogy that much more fitting, and lends itself to recognizing the connections between various creative practices that involve a screen.

Whether you are looking and listening, or simply looking, there are other sensory activities happening. You are making connections to an idea, an image, a memory, a set of cultural influences, a person, an object, a film, a day. You are creating and rearranging space, focusing on changing what is there by juxtaposing it with something else, evoking something else, as the true rhythmic possibilities of one sound are brought to light when it is adjacent with another, when they can affect each other with the distance between them.

Because so much of the rhythm construction process requires recognition of possibility as much as preparation for it, utilizing the randomness that happens from recording different scenarios is essential for finding rhythms that are never thought of, because they happen by chance, either from a situation that one sets up or from the random occurrences of daily life. I like to organize situations that are likely to yield interesting edits, which is to say, sounds I would want to use in a piece, that fit my conception of it. There is some preconceived awareness of what types of sounds these objects, or situations, make, based on the material, but the results are not so predictable. There is room for something to happen, which can then be found in the recording, but which cannot be engineered to specifically occur. This enables chance to play a role in the process, within the structure of the setting. You have an idea of what might happen, but not of what definitely will, and this adds a sense of possibility and searching

into your edit. You may find something that you could never have imagined, which is simply perfect, or the recording might yield nothing useful, but the potential is intrinsic to the choreography of it.

Using sounds that you edited out of a recording you made can be messy. They are less locked into a specified container than sounds from a drum machine or synthesizer. That is precisely why they offer a different approach to rhythm. There is more opportunity for an individual sound to spill over and out of the container, to leave more of a trail into the next sound, altering the negative space between them, and henceforth, the rhythmic relationship. It offers chance a greater role, more possibility for mistakes to happen, and more of an ability to utilize the unexpected.

Types of Experimentation There are two basic kinds of experimenting - laying out rules to see “what happens when I do a, b, and c,” and the kind that involves playing, with no set of strict rules, and observing the results carefully, while watching out for something that resonates for the artist and could lead somewhere else. The first involves a scientific approach of orchestrating a situation in order to observe the results, where the setup is the important part and the outcome is what it is. This concept is more concerned with the constraints that lead to a result. The second approach holds an idea of where you want things to end up without knowing how you’ll get there. It is more inclined toward improvisation throughout the process, observing constantly and

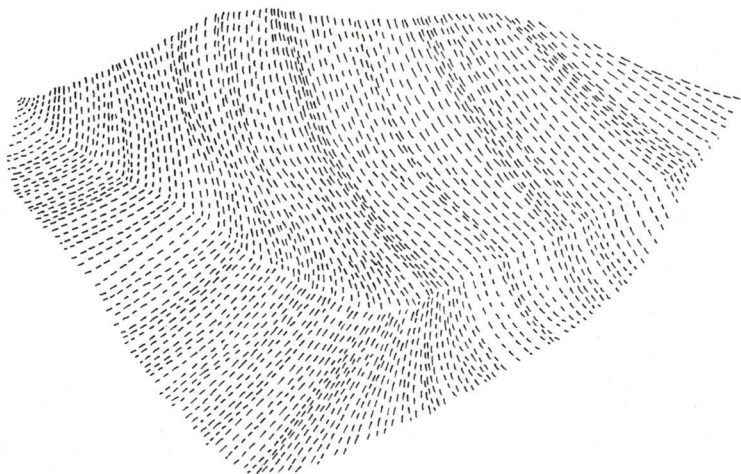
changing direction based on said observations, imposing constraints but altering what they are at every turn. It allows for happy accidents to derail from original intentions towards something pleasantly unexpected. It is a more open-ended experimentation, deciding a beginning point, but maneuvering to wherever is needed until the result matches the preconception (or the revision of that preconception).

In-Between Spaces The sound edits that come from these experimental practices still need to be arranged into a rhythm with other sounds, but the concept remains the same. Just as you are deciding on what part of a sound to keep, you are building rhythm by deciding the amount of space to keep (or create) between each of these sounds. What direction you want to take with your work determines these rhythmic choices as much as personal instinct and developed sensibilities.

The accidental nature of utilizing random objects creates rhythms that could be played by a human hand but wouldn't necessarily happen, because part of wanting to hear them is the first instance of actually hearing them, alerting one that this sound now exists in the world and can hold a place in a larger sonic object. It is this recognition, once heard, rather than an invention from scratch, which holds the key in this process.

This circles back to the idea of loose, improvisational experimentation. Just as in other aspects of life, in music, one can instigate events in a manner that sets

up possibilities, without knowing exactly how things will play out. One can orchestrate situations and be on the lookout for happy accidents and their potential. This process is supported by a flexible structure that limits to a certain extent, but bends and leaves room for a multitude of positive consequences. This approach is less concerned with steps taken to reach a specific goal and is, rather, interested in opening oneself up to the recognition of desired results when they happen - identifying them as such, seeing the possibilities - and ultimately continuing to develop oneself and one's sonic blueprint.



Spatial Materials

Space can be used on its own terms. It affects the sound not by being added through signal processing, but by physically existing around it. By placing oneself within a specific space, moving within it, it is easier to recognize that sometimes a sound feels essential because of the contours of the place in which it is happening, as much as or more than the object or person originating it. There are certain spaces in which this is immediately evident, like a tunnel or cavern, but that glaring example reminds us of the less overt ones. It reminds us that all spaces (indoor and outdoor) have a feel of their own, a tone, a unique means of altering the sounds within them. It can be a reverb, a dampening, or a certain quality that only arises from the particular angle at which the recording device is placed, the movement of it (or lack thereof), and the environment around it. A plane sounds different over an open field than it does over a crowded metropolis. The amount of people and objects around you alters anything you hear. The size and shape of a room, as well as the material its walls are made of, creates a different effect. The world around you can be used as a means of processing itself.

Sounds From a Distance Distance can play an important role. Events happen far away from where you are holding the microphone and that space the sound travels across adds layers of mystery and even

complexity. You can attempt to decipher where the signal is coming from, and begin to write a story in your head of why the sound is happening, what was going on, how the surroundings affected it, who made it. The distance helps to outline the space, without giving away all its secrets. It gives the impression of what was there because hearing distance implies a setting without being too explicit. It offers clues while allowing one to explore, to imagine different scenarios and structures.

I believe that these thoughts flow through one's head quickly and subconsciously, so though they aren't always acknowledged, they are communicated, and their effect is felt. Using the distance inherent in the recording can add meaning to the work if used sensitively and with purpose. It can open up the space of a track even when all other elements are tight and up-front, as distance tells an ambiguous, open-ended story that has been re-appropriated for your purpose.

A package is dropped while being moved off a truck two blocks away, and the sound bounces off the concrete ground and the building next to it. A sound which might be easily recognizable becomes less so because the distance translates it differently. Characteristics are added to the sound by means of the traveling towards you, the objects it passes through, the tail of the wave that reaches you. There are different possibilities than there would be if you recorded the same object from a few feet away, because it is now less defined, less specific.

The simple shattering of the package on the ground can become various percussion sounds by means of editing out fractions of it. An exhaust pipe exhaling in the background can be isolated and used for its melodic character. The whole event – the entirety of those movements – can be used as peripheral shading to the centerpiece of a track. It can be a simple incident that happens once. It can be smeared flat and stretched out into a texture with smatterings of the original sound left intact. There are likely to be endless possibilities for finding usable sound in this recording of a box falling on the ground while being moved off a truck.

Crowded Sound When recording in any space where you have little control over what's happening – outdoors, inside an auditorium, or the like – there is opportunity for serendipitous moments to occur with fragments in the mix that cannot easily be separated from the rest of it. In these instances I enjoy taking advantage of the cacophony of many layers of sounds, crowds chattering and stepping, a construction site blocks away, traffic sounds reverberating off a building. I find it can be almost paradoxically easier to create an intimate space because of the layers of sound, because of the crowdedness of it.

I like to carve out a quiet within the jumbled, environmental, incidental reality. Maybe this is because I grew up in New York City and had to become comfortable with finding the room within the crowd, but

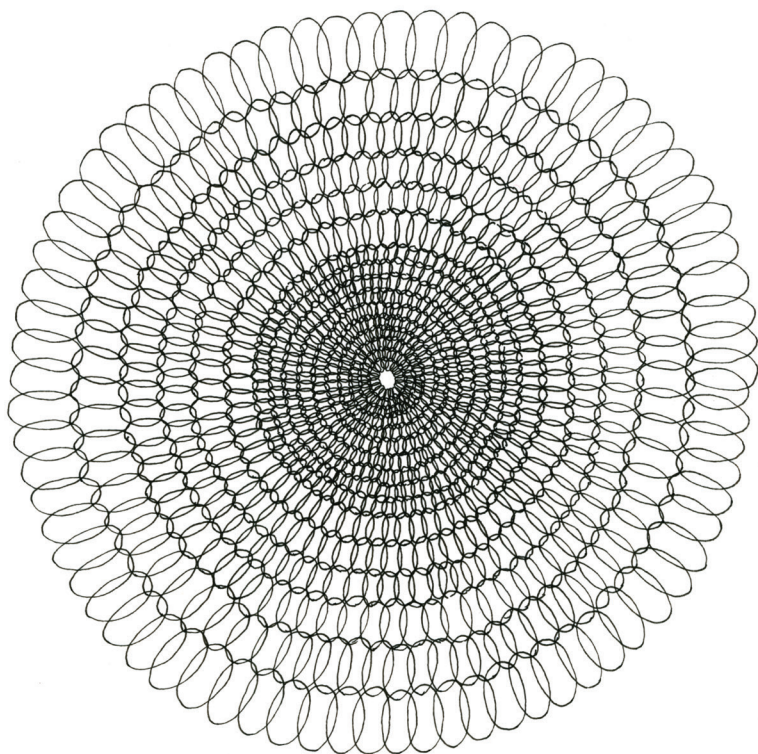
regardless, that seeming lack of solitude and meditative space can be harnessed towards exactly that, a person-centered, internalized experience, which is perhaps more personal because of the contrast with the noise around it.

Indoor Acoustics You can still use distance indoors, but it's a more controlled distance, of knowing what is happening in the space. Setting up the microphone and walking six feet away, then twelve, then three... Recording through a closed door for a muted filter, down a hallway for extra reverb, inside a small room with the door closed... You can use your space as an effect, one that is more intuitive and physical than a digital audio workstation, even if it is less bendable to one's will. It isn't mimicking a space. It is one.

Recording in the home can open up worlds that we pass by, focus our attention on the routine and the possibilities that rest in the randomness of everyday life. It can produce an enormous intimacy of sound, a vision of an object as a living entity that can be interacted with. There is a built-in sense of association and memory with the things we live with regularly, or the space we move through daily. These connections can affect how you use an object for recording purposes, and also how you accept certain obvious points about its usage, which is a prerequisite to moving past that, to thinking about what sounds you can wring out of it by letting go of some preconceived associations, in order to build new ones. You may begin by using an object as intended, and then

develop a sense of play, of experimentation, of seeing what sounds you can pull out of it.

The way a wooden block slides across a table, or the crumpling of paper against a wall, the closing of a jar, or the shuffling of slippered footsteps... These are all familiar sounds/images and can be subverted towards something new. They can be processed, taken apart, bent toward the ends of your work. They construct a universe of new sound that begins with the mundane but becomes a novel approach to creating moments that no longer resemble the things they are, and become the underpinnings of something else. You are using objects to make sound, not for their intended functional purpose. They are now instruments, noisemakers, so their original intention can be ignored. Universes of thought and memory reside in these commonplace things and spaces, and can be funneled into your work.



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Construction

Beginning There is a blank slate of potential. The ideas you have in your head remain there, fueled by anticipation and possibility. For some, the beginning is the easiest part. You're making sketches, throwing things on the canvas to see what sticks, playing around and experimenting with rhythms. This work is prior to the development stages where you flesh out an idea and take it in new directions. It is before the finishing stage where you have to actually walk away from it. In the beginning you are looking ahead to a future because there is nothing yet to look back towards.

There is great value in the experimentation that comes out of this part of the process, in the freedom that is inherent because of the lack of form. One is not yet sticking to tried and true progressions or adhering to anything specific, not yet attempting to continue the direction in which a piece is already moving, because it hasn't yet begun that movement. It's still simple to begin with an idea and let a slight deviation turn the tide of the track and push it into something else entirely. That is the purpose of the beginning, to not get bogged down in preconceived notions, to be constructing the limits as you go, so you have room to stretch.

Developing Developing is where more questions need to be answered, more decisions need to be made, more ingenuity discovered. Moving from the beginning to a

place where the work begins to take a more defined shape can be scary and nerve-racking. It's no longer a sketch, no longer a series of loops that you're playing around with. It is no longer a story that can go anywhere but is instead taking on more meaning and turning into a semblance of the end result, a hint at the finished object, even if there is still so much space to explore. It is natural to be both excited by, and fearful of, the question, "what happens next?" Should you retain a loop and embellish it? Should you shift gears more definitively? Should you circle back to the beginning, or retain a traditional song structure idea? This can be the moment where the track becomes a real thing, which builds more pressure in to the process, for it can become more difficult to unravel the threads if you go too far down the wrong path.

Sometimes the beginning can flow smoothly into developing something further, where one sound can spawn an entire song. It is not easy, simple, or commonplace, but one sound can act as the inspiration for building something around it, and help to envision patterns that hold it at the center, even if it doesn't seem like it would be a main element of the arrangement. I have had this experience before, where the hook of a sound helped me to understand how it would motivate the structure of the rest of the track, where its necessity dictated aspects of the arrangement, helping to determine percussion, the space of other sounds, and the overall direction of a piece. I don't think this is something you can plan. I don't think you can expect it. I

do think that if you are aware of the possibility it can lurk in the back of your mind and come alive when needed, when it is time to notice it.

On a similar note, sometimes the development of a song can directly lead to two or three versions that branch off of that initial skeleton. In these situations the first version may act as a vehicle to get from point A to point B, and never become more developed into itself. It is a stepping stone needed to flesh out an idea and lead elsewhere, a sketch that opportunely brings you to the desired destination. Possibly a loop leads to variations of itself, or a seemingly incidental replacement sound derails the song towards another direction. These types of openings leave room for greater possibilities, for the unexpected becoming the secret tool that you were hoping for.

These are illustrations of a more general idea, that there are thousands of decisions that go into the process of sound recording, editing, processing, arranging, and there are infinite possibilities within each of those decisions. If you have multiple layers of influences, concepts, awareness, and artistic sensibilities at your disposal, you will be better equipped to make the decisions that bring you closest to your desired goal, and indeed, to recognize what that goal is in the first place.

Perspective Regardless of style and technique, it is incredibly important to remember the ability to step

away from the work in order to move forward. Changing your perspective is necessary for understanding the material differently, for seeing it for what it is, with enough of a critical distance that you can rewrite mistakes. You need to be able to view your work through the lens of another person (who is viewing it through you) in order to avoid it becoming simply a conversation with yourself. A day or two apart from the material can do wonders, but sometimes just ten minutes in a different mindset is effective.

This critical distance leaves space for more to influence you – more culture, more daily life, more thoughts and experiences. It is all valuable because art is not made in a vacuum. Instincts are important and the immediacy of thought is important. However, even if you somehow managed to complete the bulk of a piece in a short time and felt happy with it, stepping aside for a day and returning to it would allow you to see/hear it differently, because you would then be a different person than you were the day before, and this would likely add more depth to the sound, by sheer nature of this added perspective, regardless of genre, style, or direction.

Finishing/Ending I often think of a common saying, that one doesn't finish a work of art, but merely abandons it. This trope points to the simple fact that the idea of completion is a grey area surrounded by ambivalence. After much energy and time is poured into something we want it to be done, but we simultaneously want to keep it going. To finish is essentially to abandon a relationship

that you've built up with the work. How do you just walk away, and yet, without walking away the work remains in flux and isn't ready to be presented, exhibited to others. If handing material off for listening/viewing - to be experienced - is indeed your goal, the abandonment point is necessary, or more positively, the point of finishing, which can be defined merely as the moment the artist leaves the work alone.

The psychology of finishing is integral. It requires one to stop working, to let go, which is counterintuitive in a sense, because isn't the work a constant process? If things are practiced correctly, one recognizes that one is never actually done, because the goal isn't necessarily to finish but to develop. The approach of an idea ends up branching out into a myriad of other ideas, rethinking the original intent and refining it, so how can one simply stop and say this is now ready?

This hesitance is bound up with the element of exposure and allowing oneself to focus energy on a different piece of work. To finish usually involves some sort of releasing of the work into another place, where it is no longer protected from the perception of others, where it is essentially no longer under your control. A listener is required to close the circuit, to perceive what you have made, but that also changes the circuit. Perhaps intentions aren't communicated exactly as you had hoped. Perhaps the listener hears the piece "incorrectly," or on a bad sound system, or perhaps they just don't like it very much. Once material leaves the safety of

your studio it is a real thing, whereas the previous lack of concrete results left a world of possibilities. It is important, however, to remember that so many of those possibilities require the work to be finished, to be defined.

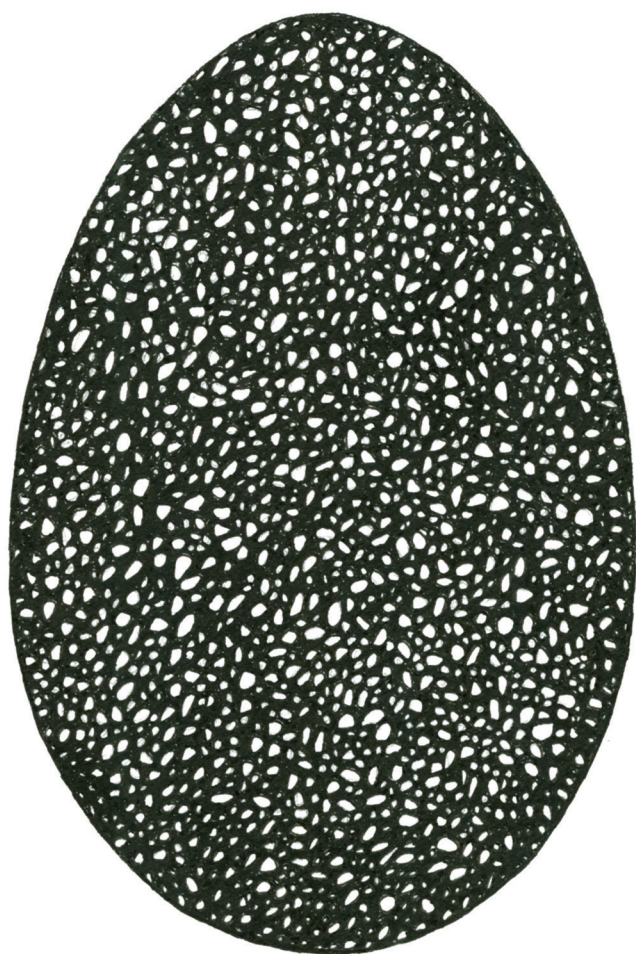
The reception of an artistic work by others, whether critically or otherwise, matters less if the work succeeds in what the artist was attempting to do with it. Perfection is simply the closest approximation of a thing to its chosen identity. It can be measured by its own standard, though it does need to adhere to that standard. Finishing becomes a more specified concept altogether, and though it doesn't make completing work simpler, it may become clearer, remain truer to the practice and one's artistic development. The sense of completion can be reframed as something inherently meaningful, as a piece of something larger that leaves space for more to happen, while still fulfilling its individual potential.

The Larger Body of Work Ideally, your work is constantly in motion. When one arrives at a certain style, it is the result of working through something, while continuing to explore different possible directions. This can be a work-around for the finishing question. When a track (or painting, or screenplay, etc.) is done, it may be less a matter of it being complete and more a sense that it allows a pause in the larger work of a certain style. You don't have to be done. You can do it all over again. You can break it up into pieces over time and finish the pieces. The accumulation of them can go on and on

and add more meaning and development to the body of work, which can in many cases be seen as one piece of material with many facets to it, many wrinkles that act as the means of exploring everything you want to do in one track, but simply cannot.

Everyone has a personal moment of recognizing, or accepting, that something is finished. It is as much a part of one's individual creative process as choosing sounds to work with, and needs to be developed over time. The way something is mixed, the amount of closure or strands left undone, the way sounds are edited, and every other decision that happens, is both part of one's general style and approach to finishing. Each moment adds up towards the whole, and what is completion if not some sort of resolution to that whole?

As you finish more pieces you realize what your work sounds like when it's at that point, and what you want it to sound like in order to be deemed so. Reaching the goal of completion helps to bring about a definition of it, which makes it more likely to happen in the future, which continually reinforces and redefines that definition. You begin to develop a means of arriving at that place over time, through trial, error, observation, experimentation. It never becomes a rote process, hopefully, but perhaps can become more obvious, more understandable when something is completed, when it has reached a suitable end.



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Conclusion

Rules and customs built up by tradition offer a wealth of shared, inherited experience, and incorporating them in a way that fits for you allows the building of a new tradition, a way of working, which, through practice and time, becomes more instinctual and offers its own boundaries and limits. We have returned to a folk sense of creativity, of a greater number of people regularly engaging in artistic practices, and an increasingly blurry, and arguably less important, distinction between professional and casual. With a plethora of tools available everyone is in the same space, with access to similarly designed software and preset sounds, whether they originate from synthesizers, sample packs, or other acoustic and electronic instruments. We find ourselves searching for more means of arriving at a unique, original approach, a path towards an individual voice in a crowded landscape. Each person needs to figure out what works well for them, in their material, their desired results. When discovered, one's original tradition becomes a personal mythology, a different means of telling a story, which is more connected to you and your process, your choices.

Unorthodox sound sources and means of producing music are not meant for everyone. To impose it on others would be constricting, and I would advise a lack of stricture, an opening up of our perspective. We should foster a love of expanding musical structures, loosen the

reins and hear what is affecting us, and affected by us, on a daily basis. Regardless of what you use in a creative work, thinking of all sound as potential affects how you listen and how you hear the sounds you do use. It trains one to think of sound in a new light, which spreads to all of it, not only certain types. We should learn to listen with purpose, and shift focus at will, regardless of creative intentions in a given moment. We should be in the habit of listening, even if it is just during a random stroll down the street, a moment sitting in a park, or in transit, training ourselves to hear carefully. Just as an architect may look at a building in a different way, a musician should listen to the world in a different way. (Architects should probably listen to the world differently as well.)

Ideally, we are always learning about how we work, how we organize thoughts and objects, and how we hope to improve on that organizational instinct. If we keep the feedback loop moving, looking at past work will inherently be through the lens of the present, which then returns and allows the influence of hindsight to affect the work that is yet to come. Choices in music, as in life, add up, and this accumulation becomes a new thing, the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. Rather than asking questions explicitly and constantly, a steady awareness is required, and as you may have experienced with another type of learned awareness, it becomes part of the background, becomes pervasive and persistent, and grows to be less of a conscious thought and more of an autonomic process. It takes time to develop your

instincts, your sense of logic that happens without thinking, but once developed it helps with every choice from that point forward.

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