

Playing with Bits, Pieces, and Lightning Bolts: An Interview with Sound Artist Andrea Parkins

Maile Colbert

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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), Aesthetics, Digital Media, Interview, Play, Sound And Play



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Editor's Note: Welcome to *Sounding Out!*'s fall series titled **"Sound and Play,"** where we ask how sound studies, as a discipline, can help us to think through several canonical perspectives on play. While Johan Huizinga had once argued that play is the primeval foundation from which all culture has sprung, it is important to ask where sound fits into this construction of culture; does it too have the potential to liberate or re-entrench our social worlds? SO!'s regular contributor Maile Colbert interviews sound artist Andrea Parkins and gets her to talk about her creative process, and the experience of playing with sound, composition, and instruments. **-AT**

In 2003, working towards my graduate degree in Integrated Media at California Institute for the Arts, I met and worked with a visiting artist by the name of Andrea Parkins, with whom I became a friend and colleague. Although I've been familiar with her work for more than a decade, every time I see Andrea perform my mind is blown. And, every time we discuss her practice, her methodology, and her thoughts on art and work, I'm always compelled and inspired in my own practice as a sound artist. In particular, I am impressed by her insights on the relationship between art, play, and the act of improvisation. The interview that follows is both a sampling of the conversations we have been gifted with throughout the years and a rare opportunity to listen in to the creative process of a working sound artist.

1. Hi Andrea, how are you today? What are you in the middle of?

I'm well – working on a number of different projects at the moment, including preparing for a residency at *Q-02: workspace for experimental music and sound art*, in Brussels, where I'm going to be working on a new multi-diffusion sound piece, addressing the interaction of moving objects with human gesture in idiosyncratic acoustical spaces. I'm also working on some new recordings – one is a catalogue of short pieces, combining electric accordion-generated feedback with processed field recordings; and another incorporates 15 short object-based electronic pieces into a live ensemble work.

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2. Can you describe your entrance into the world of sound and music?

I grew up in Western Pennsylvania, acutely aware of the drones and sonic events in the surrounding rural landscape. At the same time my early experience of sound through my teens resided in realm of the "musical" and the social; it connoted family (nearly all of my family members were/are musicians, and music and sound was always present); culture; and musical

practice as ritual. Most family members were serious classical musicians, some were rock musicians and singer/songwriters; some were both. I studied classical piano from the age of 6 through my early twenties, and from the beginning had access to and absorbed a wide range of musics—immediately attracted to dissonance, or music with subtle harmonic and timbral changes. After high school, I moved to Boston and studied jazz piano and free improvisation. In my early 20s, I bought an analog synth, and experimented with oscillators and filters, playing synth in punk, free jazz, and new wave bands. Probably most important in my sonic development was that I went to art school and in that context began making experimental films and video, drawings and installation. I believe that my exposure to non-narrative film especially had a profound effect on how I began thinking of compositional possibilities for sound, and about art that happens *in time*, and also space

3. Speaking of worlds, what is the line experienced, if there is one, between the experimental sound art world and improvisation? How did you find yourself with one foot in each of these worlds, and how do you navigate between them?

While I know that some artists and theorists do draw a line between sound art and improvisational “music” performance, I don’t usually think about it that way, and for the most part that is not how I experience my relationship with sound. Having said this, I recognize that there are communities that identify themselves as one thing or the other, and performance and exhibition spaces that are organized based on one side or the other of this dichotomy, so at times I do have to “navigate between them.” This isn’t necessarily a bad thing: this allows artists to build a common discourse around their particular focus, and can even develop a creative legacy among artists. For myself, I try to think about my intentions regarding a particular installation or performance: especially in consideration of site and audience, and formulate language around this that can speak to the specifics of the situation.



Photo Credit: Paul Geluso 2009

4. And being a woman in these worlds, have you found a difference between when you were starting out and now? Have you found a difference within the generations you work with?

I believe that for younger women, things have changed a lot: peer communities of young artists are more integrated gender-wise, and it seems that there are many more women worldwide who are active and visible as experimental musicians and sound artists than when I began. I came “of age” at a different juncture and did not have this experience. To some extent this was because of the class and milieu that I came from, which meant there was no model in front of me. I do think this would have been mitigated if I had learned sooner about some of the female innovators of electronic music, among them: Bebe Barron, Wendy (Walter) Carlos, Eliane Radigue, Maryanne Amacher, Laurie Spiegel, and Pauline Oliveros. This exposure came later.

When I began working as an improvising musician, I found myself on the periphery, and never wholly part of, a group of mostly male colleagues. There were aspects to this experience that I actually now appreciate. It had value because I remained in the position of an outsider, and while I felt some sense of displacement because of this, it allowed me to develop my own critique of whatever prevailing processes and products were happening at that time, and a new assessment of what I wanted to create. I should mention that when working alone or in collaboration in other forms: intermedia, sound and performance installation, I have found that these contexts offer a more inclusive politics and discourse.

5. Something interesting came up in our last conversation that inspired me to change this question around a bit. Instead of asking you to talk about your works, and since our readers can

access many different interviews, documents, and articles online, can you talk about how to talk about your work?

This is something I am learning how to do (yet again), as I become more aware that my work engages with multiple practices, multiple voices, multiple processes. It's about beauty too (that dirty word) – in the sense that beauty (for me) is about viscosity, atmosphere, presence, fragility; this calls my attention to the physical space I am in and to how time is passing: that is to say, to mortality. Most recently I have been seeking different forms of sonic structure that are not based on “history” as forward motion, as a narrative driving through time, but that can allow for stasis, multiplicity, simultaneity, and chaos and acceptance of a potentially forward moving structure to fall totally apart.

Since 2005, in addition to exploring these modalities as an improviser and composer (for live instruments), I have been working to reintegrate a more interdisciplinary approach to my work – referencing the materiality of objects, and the body in motion, and engaging in wider range of sonic sources and processes, visual elements, and acoustical spaces. This has resulted in my creation of several fixed media works for the gallery/installation setting, as well as some electronic music pieces scored only for objects.

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6. The term improvisation confuses a lot of people, and can be hard to articulate. What does it mean to you? And within improv, what does “work” and what does “play” means to you?

Speaking most simply, improvisation is (for me) a series of compositional decisions made in real time that are then immediately acted upon, with acute attention: to self, other, site and context. Being an improviser entails so much *listening* (to oneself and others, at the same time) and also *connecting* with others while maintaining one's own sonic space/language; in a way it's social and interiorized process at the same time. So it's *work*! You are — at times — *straining* your ears; listening for the clues for what others are “saying,” even if they are not quite saying it. Perhaps this even involves a kind of telepathy. However, at its best moments it can be exhilarating work; there can be lively engagement among fellow performers — or when performing alone when moving among one's own sonic materials and instruments — that is highly stimulating and *fun*.



Photo credit: Maile Colbert 2010

7. Is there a *hierarchy of process versus presentation* for you?

I often find that my best-laid plans must be jettisoned because I have an idea or epiphany that suddenly strikes me, and it just won't wait. For me, these "lightening bolts" often quickly resolve into having to face a challenging new work process — challenging perhaps because I have been afraid that somehow it won't produce a result that I can readily identify as successful. But the old ways will always be there, and in the meantime it is possible that by trying something else, a new discovery will come that transforms everything – including the way I think about what a

“successful result” should look like. I now feel that the notion of a “successful result” in itself has become pretty relative, and in some cases, a moot point. This is because what I now define as successful can often have much to do with my assessment of the *process* I employ in making something, rather than how well I have fulfilled the requirements of a pre-meditated structure: the result. This has made my engagement with my work much more open-ended in a way that I have learned to appreciate over time.

For me, composition mostly happens in the editing: that is where I find (uncover, sculpt) structure from the sound that I collect and/or record, building up a mass of material from which I can “find the piece” through editing, assemblage and layering. I think this is similar to the way some filmmakers might shoot video/film and then from raw footage hone in on or discover a film’s structure via the editing process. I like the idea that instead of filling a pre-ordained structure with content one can move the content around until the structure emerges. Maybe one recognizes the completed structure when one sees it. I like to remember that a structure, even if unusual, asymmetric, messy, seemingly random, or just plain weird – if that is what emerges – is still a structure, howsoever idiosyncratic. And it can be presented.



Photo Credit: Herve Le Gall 2012

8. Can you talk about differences between performance vs. play and performance vs. studio to you, and your relationship with the instruments you play?

In 2002, I began developing a MAX-based extended processing instrument inspired by Rube Goldberg and his machines. It has built into its programming seemingly “randomized” sonic processing that highlights and/or alters specific frequencies and densities, with emphasis on repetitions, interruptions, stasis and malfunction. When I began working with the instrument, I was exploring processes related to Fluxus in my compositional and improvisational practices. I

was also thinking about a kind of poetics that I saw as related to my independent studies in feminist and psychoanalytic theory, and to the body of an improvising performer who is up against the limits of his or her own virtuosity. Once I designed the instrument I realized there really was a connection to these things – and to how approach decision-making as an artist – the importance of chance – but also slippage and failure and moments of physical awkwardness as what I try to accomplish on a technical level comes perilously (and for me, interestingly) close to falling apart – especially when performing with multiple instruments in simultaneity. My virtual instrument is a collaborative partner who doesn't cooperate. It makes "sense and non-sense," The slippage and failure relates to meaning, and for me is a metaphor for loss or displacement. For me, this is important ... to me this *is* daily, everyday life.



Photo Credit: Glenn Cornett 2013

Featured Image Photo Credit: Julia Berg 2010

Andrea Parkins is a composer, sound/installation artist and improvising electroacoustic performer who engages with interactive electronics as compositional/performative process, and explores strategies related to Fluxus' ordered, ephemeral activities. She is a key participant in the New York sound art and experimental music scene, and worldwide she is known for her pioneering gestural/textural approach on her electronically-processed accordion and self-designed virtual sound-processing instruments. Described as a "*sound-ist*," of "protean," talent by *The New York*

Times music critic Steve Smith, Parkins' laptop electronics and Fender-amped accordion create sonic fields of lush harmonics and sculpted electronic feedback, punctuated by moments of gap and rift. Her work has been presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Kitchen, Diapason, and Experimental Intermedia; and international festivals/venues including Mexico City's 1st International Sound Art Festival, NEXT in Bratislava, Cyberfest in St. Petersburg, and q-02 in Brussels. Parkins' recordings have been published by Important Records, Atavistic, and Creative Sources, and her work has received support from American Composers Forum, NYSCA, the French-American Cultural Exchange, Meet the Composer, Harvestworks Digital Media Arts Center, and *Frei und Hansestadt Hamburg Kulturbehörde*. Parkins is on faculty at Goddard College's MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts program.

Maile Colbert is a multi-media artist with a concentration on sound and video who relocated from Los Angeles, US to Lisbon, Portugal. She is a regular writer for Sounding Out!



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