On the Poetics of Balloon Music: Sound Artist Judy Dunaway (Part Two)

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Abstract

Last week, Carlo Patrão published "On the Poetics of Balloon Music: Sounding Air, Body, and Latex (Part One)," which examined the history of the association between balloon travel and experimentation and the idea of silence, along with a round up of conceptual artists who have used balloons in their work.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Cultural Studies, Disability Studies, Gender, Humanism



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Last week, Carlo Patrão published "On the Poetics of Balloon Music: Sounding Air, Body, and Latex (Part One)," which examined the history of the association between balloon travel and experimentation and the idea of silence, along with a round up of conceptual artists who have used balloons in their work. Today's post continues this exploration with an in-depth conversation between the author, producer Marina Koslock and sound artist Judy Dunaway.

> *We look at alien grace,*
>
> *unfettered*
>
> *by any determined form,*
>
> *and we say: balloon, flower,*
>
> *heart, condom, opera,*
>
> *lampshade, parasol, ballet.*
>
> *Hear how the mouth,*
>
> *so full*
>
> *of longing for the world,*
>
> *changes its shape?*
>
> *Excerpt from Difference, by Mark Doty*

PLAY //

Against Levity: Experimental Music and the Latex Balloon

The term *balloon music* gained some virality in 2011 after Finn, the protagonist of the animated series *Adventure Time*, rubbed a toy balloon and improvised a rap over its squeaky sounds. "Balloon music is the future," says the character. This few second-long scene became an instant meme, inspiring many to share their own versions of the "futuristic sound of balloon music."

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https://youtu.be/i2r8dfu8i_E

Balloons themselves are viral objects. Designed to infect our moods, they are part of social rituals ranging from the deeply personal to collective (political) euphoria. They are cheap, amusing and awe-inducing. As resonant chambers, balloon membranes are sonically responsive to touch while, at the same time, highly tuned to the vibrations of the environment. To start playing a balloon, no prior experience is required. In this sense, the balloon is a democratic instrument whose sonic textures circumvent expensive music equipment.

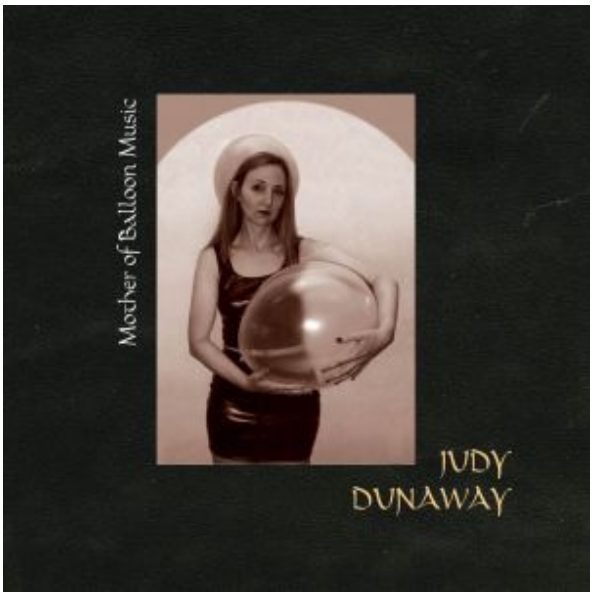
The Jazz composer Anthony Braxton was once asked why he used balloons in his *Composition 25* (1972). Braxton replied: "I didn't have enough money for the electronic equipment that could make those kinds of sounds. I'm interested in the expanded reality of sound opened up by the post-Webern continuum, but I'm restricted to using cheap materials. So, you know, I was walking down the street one night and I thought, *Hey! I gotta have balloons*!"



https://youtu.be/iH6LkocyoM0

Anthony Braxton, *B-Xo/N-0-1-47a or Composition 6G*, w/ Leroy Jenkins, Leo Smith and Steve McCall, with balloon sounds, 1969

"For me, that piece (Composition 25) really best demonstrates the full symbolic meaning of the balloon in the early avant-garde," says balloon music composer Judy Dunaway. "I've discussed this with Braxton himself – the balloon replicated electronic equipment that he couldn't afford at the time, but he also saw it as a way to open up the minds of the performers to get them to think differently about how they were improvising and how they were interacting in the piece." Braxton's *Composition 25* is scored for 250 balloons and musicians are required to produce sound by squeezing, rubbing and popping balloons. "I like the idea that he breaks down the hierarchy," adds Dunaway, "black musicians were discriminated against and they didn't have the financial means that the white musicians had... and he was using this as a way to get beyond that and say: Here, I'm going to do electronic sounds without any electronics, I don't need to go buy a Buchla or be associated with an academic institution that can give me access to equipment, right?"



Judy Dunaway, Mother of Balloon Music, Innova Recordings, 2006

Producer Marina Koslock and I met Judy Dunaway at MassArt in Boston to talk about her balloon-based *sculptural sonic performances* and the ready-made latex balloon as a sound producing instrument. For the past 25 years, Dunaway has been developing a singular specialization in the balloon as a medium for sound and music. You can keep just broadening out and do more things with a concept; or you can work in a particular parameter as an artist and keep digging deeper and deeper and deeper, and that for me as been more interesting, is to pursue that line", explains Dunaway.

As a consequence, her balloon work has spanned out through several records (e.g. *Balloon Music* and *Mother of Balloon Music*), scores, sound sculptures, solo performances, ensembles, and numerous installations. The poetics of the latex balloon as a sound producing instrument contrast

with the atmospheric balloon explored in part one of this article. The balloon, no longer buoyant, stays in close proximity to the body of the performer. The surface of the balloon is vibrated through rubbing, stroking, squeezing, pulling, popping and through the control of air releases. These sonic tactile acts bring forth dialogues between the performer's body and the latex body of the balloon. "I limited my playing techniques to the balloons and my body," says Judy Dunaway, "it was essential to be able to feel everything that was happening with the balloon in order to be able to fully explore all the sonic possibilities."

https://youtu.be/UnHFfHh-k28

***The Balloon Music*, DF#, by Tina Touli, 2013-2015**

The balloon functions as an external sensory organ, like a skin, that vibrates when sound passes through. In Deaf culture, balloons have a long history of being used as resonating chambers that amplify vibration and facilitate hearing. Deaf people use them at concerts, musicals, clubs and raves to hear the music through the vibration of the balloon's membrane. David Toop writes about Alexander Bell in the 1870s encouraging students from a Boston school for deaf children to hold balloons in their hands while walking on the street as a safety measure in order to hear the vibrations from the cobblestones as fast horse-drawn wagons passed by. Vibrational information is processed in the same way as sound information. As the scholar Steph Ceraso proposes, the common definition of listening needs to be expanded to include the sensory, contextual, and material aspects of a sonic event. Dunaway's sound installation *Manual Eardrums* invites participants to a different mode of listening through the vibration of the balloon. "You are given earplugs at the door and an inflated balloon, and you hold it between your hands as you walk around the space. There's a low tone playing that sweeps between 100Hz and 150Hz and it causes different vibrational patterns in the room that you can feel and map them out," explains Dunaway. "Your eardrum is the balloon that you're holding."



Judy Dunaway performing Amplified Twister Balloon, Photo by Mizuki Nakeshu

Judy Dunaway started to play balloon music in the late 1980s, first as a preparation for guitar string and soon after as a solo instrument. It was in the midst of the AIDS Crisis and Dunaway was part of the downtown improv scene in NYC. "Many of my friends were dying," she recalls. "Everybody was saying what caused this? Nobody knew how the disease was being spread," adds Dunaway. "Then, of course, there was this discovery that it was sexually transmitted and you could prevent transmission with latex condoms. Suddenly, they had this power," she says, "latex had this power to save people's lives, and I say that that is when balloons really began to speak to me. They were something beyond a mere mechanism to make sound." Within the envelope of the balloon Dunaway found space for memory, life, and sensuality.

From the beginning, her balloon work has articulated tensions between explicit and implicit meaning around issues relating to social activism, environmentalism, and feminism. "In an era, which continues to be that a woman's control of her own body is restricted or attempts are being made to restrict our bodies, I coupled myself to this instrument that expresses sensuality, sexuality, and humanity," says Dunaway. The balloon, as a resonating chamber, bypasses western musical traditions that mechanize the body and gender stereotype musical expression. For Dunaway, the balloon generates a "non-judgmental somatic relationship."

"Seeing my connection to the body of the balloon, that to me served as an unspoken rebellion against the patriarchy, against the power structures that have oppressed women and, ultimately, all humankind by severing the psyche and the body," says Dunaway. Following the scholar Robin James, the patriarchy is not just a "relation among people" but is also a "relation among sounds" that are coded in a gender system of masculine *absolute*/feminine *other*. "The way I approach the balloon is not nailed or fixed or part of this history," clarifies Dunaway. The balloon as an instrument has allowed Dunaway to develop a musical lexicon outside of a male-dominated classical heritage.



https://youtu.be/eUoLIQR4Rg4

Judy Dunaway performing *Piece for Tenor Balloon*, written notation with improvisational passages, 2002

For example, this is her description of the round balloon as a sounding instrument:

> *Imagine a string, a string on a violin or guitar, and this string is held taut on either end by a the tuning pegs and the bridge now imagine that string suddenly melted and spun out into an orb and it's all held tight by a column of air. . .this is the palette that I have to access when I play the Tenor Balloon, I have all these harmonics on this curved shape, and I control it partially with my knees.*

The Tenor Balloon is placed between both knees and Dunaway applies and releases pressure on the balloon producing microtonal changes on its surface. "And I also use water," she adds, "copious amounts of water, warm water on the balloon and on my hands because that's the way I get this stick and slip mechanism to work." The hands gliding on the balloon's surface act similar to a bow on a string reaching different nodes and moving through harmonic series.



https://youtu.be/ITZ1ux6_gi4

Judy Dunaway performing "Hommage à Kenneth Noland", for amplified giant balloon, vibrators, synthesized tones, and projected video, with Max/MSP/Jitter interface, 2017

Each balloon requires its own specific touch or sounding technique. On the piece *Amplified Giant Balloon,* vibrators are used to resonate the surface of a giant balloon creating a low drone sound. "It's like vibrating a giant bass string", says Dunaway, "I tune my vibrators, I go to the sex shop and I listen to vibrators, and I tune the vibrators to each other so there's a little beating pattern between them that I can control."

Around 2015, Dunaway added a new balloon to her solo performances, the *Amplified Twister Balloon.* The twister balloon is equivalent to the long balloons used to make balloon-animals. Due to its string-like shape, the sounds produced through rubbing or gliding differ from the sounds of a round balloon. "The harmonic series isn't so predictable," she continues, "the tension is highest close to the navel of the balloon and that makes it microtonal different from one end to the other like an out-of-tune bugle." Visually, the *Amplified Twister Balloon* performance delivers a feminist affirming statement. Defying the tradition of the male guitarist stroking the female form of the guitar, Dunaway finds musical material in a phallic-shaped balloon. "I sort of invert this", she says, "now I have the penis form that I'm stroking and caressing and I'm taking this phallic power for myself in the Amplified Twister Balloon."

"My work doesn't come out of a void," states Dunaway. In the article *My Beautiful Balloon*, Dunaway maps out a detailed history of the balloon in experimental and avant-garde music. Many Fluxus artists used the balloon in events, concerts and instructional scores. The sounds of the balloon embodied Fluxus' humorous/satirical attitude towards art and the collapse of hierarchies of experience by reframing everyday life objects. Balloons are used by DIY artists that re-invent, hack and create new music instruments (Jean Francois Laporte, Thierry Madiot, Aaron Wendell, Tom Nunn, Javier Bustos). Balloon sounds are explored by many artists with backgrounds ranging from improvised music, rock, electronic or electro-acoustic and sound installation (Ricardo Arias,

David Bedford, Mauricio Kagel, Alvin Lucier, Terry Day, Tod Dockstader, Christine Sun Kim, Davide Tidoni, Sharon Gal, Eugene Chadbourne, Matmos, EVOL, Alan Nakagawa, to name a few).



Balloon Music Compilation

To develop a practice around the accessibility of latex is to engage with politics of mass-production and exploitation of resources and labor. Dunaway mentions the connection between the *air* and *breath* that fills the balloon and the mass-extraction of latex from the *lungs of the Earth*. "[Balloons] are literally the blood from a tree in the Amazon," says Dunaway, "and there's a whole history of how the indigenous people there were and still are persecuted. Now, they are mostly farmed in Malaysia," she adds.



Latex being collected from a tapped rubber tree, Wikimedia Commons

Between 1890 and 1920, a rubber fever led to a boom of extraction and exploitation of rubber-bearing plants in the Amazonian countries and to the forced displacement, slavery and mass killing of its indigenous people. The same happened in many African countries. As John Tully writes in his book *The Devil's Milk*, "it is still true that where there is rubber there is often human suffering." Ricardo Arias, a Columbian composer working with balloons (*balloon kit*) since 1987, has acknowledged this suffering through his balloon work. In Musica Global, Arias composed a series of 20 short balloon pieces called *Caouchu: The Weeping Tree/El Árbol Que Llora* in memory of the native Americans tortured and killed by the North American and European hunger for natural rubber latex.

These ontological relations between the balloon's materiality and the environment inform Dunaway's work. "I'm writing a piece for a large 30 to 35 person balloon ensemble. This piece is called *Wind Ensemble* and is all about the air going out of the balloon, and the sound of the mouthpiece being vibrated as the air comes out." Dunaway shares a video recording of this work and the room is filled with high pitched sounds changing at different speeds. The experience is immersive; a meditation on air and vibration. "It's rather minimal in the concept because I really want you to notice the small changes and nuances over time." The performative element of the piece has balloon players squeezing the balloon's mouthpiece and bending over large balloons to make them vibrate until the balloon's last breath. "Ideally, I would like 60 balloon players, that would be great!" she exclaims. The embodied relationship that Dunaway has developed with the balloon over the past decades resulted in an artistic practice extremely tuned to the sonic proprieties of every inch of the latex balloon.



Still from Le Ballon Rouge by Albert Lamorisse, 1956

The poetics of balloon music bring forth alternative narratives that challenge dominant hierarchies of music production, bypassing expensive technology and expectations of gendered

musical expression. The balloon as an object of childhood and of playfulness is charged with emotional resonance and invites the construction of meaning while offering an opportunity to build upon subversive themes. In this two-part article, the balloon was analyzed as an object that is able to generate a vertical dimension of self and the construction of a sense of *Place* within the silence of the upper air regions that informed the "listening ear" to perceive difference. As a *Probe*, the balloon navigates the irreversibly altered constitution of the airspace, sonifying masses of air and weather data. Filled with breath or air, in *Play,* the latex balloon is an extra ear attached to our bodies that vibrate in sympathy with the terrestrial agitations of the Earth. Maybe Finn from *Adventure Time* is on to something. "Balloon music is the future."

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Featured Image: Judy Dunaway, photo by Alice Bellati

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Carlo Patrão *is a Portuguese radio producer and independent researcher based in New York city.*

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