Retrospectively Arriving at *Composition with the Sound of Its Own Découpage*

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In the summer of 2015 the Miami-based new music collective, Inlets Ensemble, invited me and two other composers (Robert Blatt and David Pocknee) to write new pieces to be performed as part of their ROCK PAPER SCISSORS concert series. The series consisted of three concerts, each focused on using one type of simple, everyday object (rocks, paper, and scissors) as an instrument through which "sonic and conceptual strategies for creating music" were explored.¹ Results of these explorations were contextualized by pieces of music from the neo-avant-garde that instrumentalized these everyday objects and contemporary work that has since emerged out of the avant-garde lineage. My own creative process revolved around reconnecting with the characteristic qualities of scissors and resulted in a solo for toy piano and video/audio playback titled *Composition with the Sound of Its Own Découpage.*²

Stemming from my earlier experiments of physically erasing handwritten notations and a collection of compositions sensitive to dimensions of performativity in producing, notating and engaging with materially manifest/ephemeral scores, my creative work since 2012 has variously engaged with the act of performance and its documentation as

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² The score for *Composition with the Sound of Its Own Découpage* may be found on the following page: “scores,” last accessed February 24, 2016. [http://rockpaperscissors.ricercata.org/scores.html](http://rockpaperscissors.ricercata.org/scores.html)
a way of musically/conceptually generating, developing and articulating ideas and knowledge. Composition with the Sound of Its Own Découpage continues this approach, and, in a gesture towards the concert series' historical context, draws from methodological principles of Robert Morris's 1961 Box with the Sound of Its Own Making in order to guide the experimental process of composition and structure the by-products thereof. In particular, Composition with the Sound of Its Own Découpage is premised on a desire to explore ways in which the destructive dimensions of scissors might be expanded and in turn serve to (re)construct ideas and knowledge relative to music and everyday experience. This essay reflects on how the destructive dimensions of scissors have been expanded in my working process by charting the progression of my engagement and (re)familiarizing myself with scissors during an initial experimentation period, and elaborating on what Seth Kim-Cohen has referred to as “retrospective composition,” wherein the activity of composition follows the documentation of processes/performances of production.

Découpage

Yoko Ono's Cut Piece (1964) is an iconic work to come out of the neo-avant-garde, using scissors as the primary instrument in performance. First performed by Ono in Japan in July 1964, in what could easily be read as a precursor to Marina Abramović's Rhythm 0 (1974), Cut Piece situates the performer in a position of objectified

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4 Seth Kim-Cohen, In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-cochlear Sonic Art (New York: Continuum, 2009), 49.
vulnerability – the score issuing a pair of scissors to be laid in front of them on stage and an invitation made to the audience to approach the stage one by one and remove/keep a bit of clothing from the performer's outfit. Although a piece ostensibly destructive in realization, many and varied performances of the piece by Ono and others attest to a rich and multivalent range of encounters with the piece.⁵ Kevin Concannon’s account of a performance of Cut Piece given by Ono in September 2003 at Paris’s Ranelagh Theatre point towards one constructive potential of the piece.⁶

In her 2003 performance, Ono’s intentions were instrumentalized, much like the pair of scissors, to express her hopes for world peace. In addition to inviting audience members to come on stage and cut a piece of clothing from the performer's outfit, participants were encouraged to send their cut piece of fabric to a loved one as a sign of reconciliation in light of “the political changes in the wake of 9/11.”⁷ Regardless of any personal feelings I have about the efficacy this gesture, recognition of the differences in how what remains from an act of cutting could be repurposed, expanded my appreciation of the destructive dimensions of scissors.

Tied to a consideration of what remains from a cutting-of is a consideration of the quality of the cutting itself, or, as David Banash has expressed it in relation to collage practices,

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⁶ Ibid
the "excitement of the cut." During the initial stages of my creative engagement with scissors I would daily build up(on) an embodied practice/knowledge – or what Diana Taylor has termed "the repertoire" – surrounding the use of scissors. In my case I was interested in the gestures, movements, performances, and sounds linked with scissors. In practice, this meant spending time:

- cutting various objects (for a while, snipping several hundreds of taut rubber bands)
- placing scissors near each of my ears and listening to the sounds the blades made as I slowly and quickly rubbed them against each other (teasing out the delicacy of sounds produced by the instrument and heightening the intimacy of physical proximity)
- listening to close-miked recordings of scissors made by members of a community of people who attest to experiencing autonomous sensory meridian responses (ASMR) triggered by particular acoustic stimuli
- and watching videos of people working with scissors (becoming particularly mesmerised by the detailed precision required in certain crafting practices, especially ‘fussy cutting’)

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Its Own Making

As part of a transmission of behaviors over a period of time – a project of interfacing with archived, documentary memories of experience and performance – I was establishing an aural, visual and kinaesthetic repertoire. Along the way I found myself documenting, through recordings and a residual collection of effaced materials, my development of this repertoire – tracing the outlines of a kind of "once-againness." Gradually, this experimental process of developing experience would come to constitute my idea of what the 'work' was. Or, put differently, I became interested in finding a way to bring all of these experiences to bear on the piece that I would eventually make and present in concert.

One model for such an approach can be found in Seth Kim-Cohen’s *In the Blink of an Ear, where he uses Robert Morris’s Box with the Sound of Its Own Making to indicate how a work “might organize its relationships to and between the process and product, the space of production versus the space of reception, and the time of making relative to the time of beholding.”* Kim-Cohen proposes that this sort of work could be an example of what he terms “retrospective composition.” Simply put, retrospective composition is "the act of composition followed by the act of performance." More specifically, it is a form of composition where “the 'score' for the sound material of the work is only available (constructible) after [a process of] performance/production.”

The Sound of Its Own Making

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12 Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-cochlear Sonic Art*, 47.
13 Ibid, 49.
Morris’s *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* consists of “a walnut box, nine and three-quarters inches in each dimension […] that contains a small speaker that plays a three-hour audiotape recording of the sounds made as Morris constructed the box.”¹⁴ As characteristic of retrospective composition, the work is “simultaneously the product of a process, the documentation of that process, and a set of instructions for the replication of that process.”¹⁵ The process in Morris’ work is the construction of a box (activating the repertoire of carpentry), and the documentation of that process (an audiotaped recording). However, what constitutes the set of instructions for replicating the process that Morris went through in order to produce the box is more complicated and warrants further discussion.

On one hand, Kim-Cohen makes the argument that the instructions for replicating Morris’s process take the form of an immaterial, “unwritten score […] something like ‘Record the sound of building a walnut box and play the recording back from inside the box’.”¹⁶ On the other hand, Kim-Cohen acknowledges an idea that the audiotaped recording/documentation of construction could serve as a materially concrete score, stating that “a set of ears conditioned to the meaning of the sound of carpentry could conceivably reconstruct the box based on the instructions – the score – provided merely by the recorded sounds of its initial construction.”¹⁷ Importantly, in this latter instance, there is a sense that the documentation could be performed – that it could be read or interpreted almost as if a text. In either case, it would seem that in Kim-Cohen’s model

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¹⁴ Ibid, 45.
¹⁵ Ibid, 49.
¹⁶ Ibid, 49.
¹⁷ Ibid, 50.
of retrospective composition, not only is the score constructible only after an act of performance (be it material or immaterial), but its construction is also the terminating point of a work-specific production process. Or, as Kim-Cohen has put it himself: “The score always arrives after the fact, to dictate the fact.”

Retrospective composition, especially in relation to Morris’s *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* helped me to think about how my process of developing a repertoire of embodied practices/knowledge could be intelligibly rendered in (to) a composition. As part of my earlier documentation, I made several close-miked audio recordings of scissors blades rubbing against each other. Thinking about these recordings, the model of retrospective composition put forward by Kim-Cohen and the methodology/title of Morris’s *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, two questions came to the foreground:

- If a box is the object produced out of Morris’s production and contextually related to the field of sculpture, what might analogous objects of production be for a composer within the field of music composition?
- How could I use the audio recordings of scissors sounds I had made, in a way that resonated with Morris’s work and interacted with an object from the field of music composition?

**Compositions with the Sounds of Their Own Notating**

The first question is partially answered in John Cage’s realization of 0’00” (1962). As another example of retrospective composition, Kim-Cohen brings into his discussion Cage’s 0’00” as a piece in which the performance itself directly and immediately derives the score.

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18 Ibid, 49.
The score for 0'00” reads: "In a situation with maximum amplification (no feedback), perform a disciplined action." [...] Cage wrote out the score by using a pen outfitted with a contact microphone, thereby turning the writing of the score into the performance, or the performance into the writing of the score. In either case, the score is nonexistent until its first performance is realized.\textsuperscript{19}

In relation to my piece, two aspects of Cage’s realization strike me as interesting here. The first is the emphasis on everyday objects, not only in terms of instrumentalization, but also aural amplification. The second is Cage’s circumscription of the text score as an object of production relative to the field of music composition.\textsuperscript{20}

Given parallel interests in presenting the process of production at the point of reception in both Cage’s 0’00” and Morris’s \textit{Box with the Sound of Its Own Making}, I attempted to imagine a subtitle to Cage’s realization of 0’00” that would resonate with Morris’ title. Remaining faithful to what actually happened in Cage’s realization, the closest title I could conceive was ‘Composing and the Sound of Notating’, whilst the subtitle to the score of 0’00” could be something like ‘Composition made alongside the Sound of Its Own Notating’.

These revisionary plays on Morris’s title turn activities of composition into acts of performance and highlight sonic byproducts of the compositional activity known as notating. More significantly though, these imaginary titles reveal two different approaches to retrospective composition in terms of endurance. Unlike Morris’s work,

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 55.
\textsuperscript{20} Incidentally, all of Kim-Cohen’s examples of retrospective composition involve instructions for replication in which language is manifest either materially or immaterially as a text score.
the object of 0'00" (the text score) does not continue to (re)present the sounding evidence of its making (its notating) beyond the moment of realization; there are no ways in which the act of composing uses the byproducts of production nor does the composition make use of (compose with) the produced sounds – composition is only related to its production and, of, and alongside.

Although a process derives the material manifestations of both works, none of the history of process is embedded in Cage’s object of production. So, whilst the method of production in Cage’s 0’00" opens up a way of thinking about how notating might be turned into an embodied performance – a repertoire of experience drawn from the tradition of composing – the question of how to produce a piece in which the history of a production process would remain embedded in, and retrospectively composed with, still persisted. What might a piece be like if it were (or could be) titled ‘Composition with the Sound of Its Own Notating’?

David Bird’s forgery #24 (2013) is the closest work I have encountered to date that would meet the criteria of being hypothetically titled ‘Composition with the Sound of Its Own Notating’. forgery #24 is formed of two, more or less literal, transcriptions, one visual and the other aural, derived from the final five bars of Niccolò Paganini’s virtuosic twenty-fourth violin caprice (circa 1805-1809). The visual transcription is a filmed performance of the composer copying by hand the final five bars of Paganini’s score onto paper with a pencil. This documentation of the action of notating, itself being a
iterative performance of performance documentation (a notated score),\textsuperscript{21} yields a derivative aural component of rubbing and scratching sounds made by the pencil which Bird describes as having a “virtuosic anatomy of its own.”\textsuperscript{22} The aural transcription entails rendering the recorded sonic byproduct of the filmed documentation into a readable form of musical notation for violin.

For the video version of the piece presented on the internet, the viewer is presented with both the filmed act of notating and a filmed performance of the notation-via-aural-transcription realized by violinist Marina Kifferstein. By encapsulating the two forms of transcription in a single video, Bird’s work simultaneously presents an object of composition, implicitly and explicitly articulates histories of engagement with that object and the process of composing, and evidences (performance) documentation’s imminently ambiguous function as simultaneously being \textit{of, for} and \textit{in-itself} performance. Substituting the inscriptive functions/byproducts of a pencil in relationship to notation in Bird’s work with the effacing and destructive functions of scissors, my own composition similarly attempts to present the sometimes-paradoxical complexity of creation.

\textsuperscript{21} For an interesting and ongoing discussion of the kinds, qualities, and functions of documentation taking place in the fields of performance studies and documentation practice, see Philip Auslander, “The Performativity of Performance Documentation,” in \textit{Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History}, ed. by Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol: Intellect, 2012).

\textsuperscript{22} David Bird, “forgery #24,” last accessed February 24, 2016. \url{http://davidbird.tv/forgery-24/}. For another example of a piece that deals with similar issues (and, by coincidence, is focused on a closely related historical period in music) see “Composing music for 11 minutes dressed in 18\textsuperscript{th} Century costume,” YouTube video, 11:25, posted by “Andy Ingamells,” last accessed February 24, 2016. \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNEFq6JQDqY}
Composition with the Sound of Its Own Découpage

It may already be obvious, but working with titles in mind is often an important part of my creative process, and something that changes very often throughout the process. As Laurie Tompkins remarks on his creative practice, “titles [...] are often references, which might get buried in the process.”

Carrying on from the imaginary titles I attributed to pieces by Bird and Cage, about halfway into my period of experimentation, I decided to start referring to my piece as Composition with the Sound of Its Own Découpage.

Serving as a corollary to the word ‘Making’ in Morris’s Box with the Sound of Its Own Making, and ‘Notating’ in my imaginary titles, the word ‘Découpage’ marks the repertoire of embodied practices/knowledge related to scissors called upon in the compositional process. Derivative from the French word decouper, découpage literally means “the act

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of cutting out," but also denotes the constructive art of decorating surfaces by applying cutouts […] and then coating with usually several layers of finish (as lacquer or varnish)." From this point on, my creative efforts were focused on answering the question posed above of how to make use of my recorded sounds of scissors in a way that resonated with Morris's work and interacted with an object from the field of music composition.

The solution I arrived at came about by engaging with notation in a performative way, similar to the mode of engagement found in Bird's work. I was interested in finding a way of cutting out notation, effacing it, and connecting that visual destruction with

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musically and aurally significant results. The following photos are some examples from the experiments I conducted in cutting out notation:
During this experimentation, I was also mindful that I possessed audio recordings of scissors sounds that I wanted to incorporate into the final piece. Thinking more about the implications of the title I had set for myself, especially the word ‘with’, I realized that I could combine my audio recordings of scissors with the sounds of another instrument to give significance to the cutting out of notation that I was doing. Using the audio recordings as a string of impulse responses to be utilized in an audio processing technique known as convolution. Although most often used to simulate and model other real spaces, convolution gives the aural impression that the sound of one instrument (in
this case, samples taken from toy pianos)\textsuperscript{26} is positioned within the space of an impulse response (in this case the sound of scissors) by multiplying the two audio signals. In effect, the toy piano samples sound like they are ‘inside’ the characteristic aural space of scissors. Furthermore, by creating two tracks, one with the original scissors recordings unprocessed and the other with the toy piano samples and scissors sounds convolved, I could fade between the two to create the effect that the sound of the instrument was being cut out by the sounds of the scissors. Watching and listening to an excerpted recording of the work may make this clearer:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BzfukzjyZiUrZTI5ZmhwblY5cmM/view?usp=sharing]

excerpt of video/audio component of Composition with the Sound of Its Own Découpage

In the video above my approach towards putting into relation the repertoire of practices associated with scissors and the act of destructively effacing notation is made visually and aurally significant. Video documentation was used to capture a performance of pitches/noteheads, and the bars that contain them, being incrementally cutout from the end of the score to the beginning.\textsuperscript{27} That video documentation was subsequently cut

\textsuperscript{26} Toy piano samples were taken from the Extensible Toy Piano Project audio archive. See “Toy Piano Audio Archive,” last accessed February 24, 2016. http://www.clarku.edu/xtp/audio.html. Whereas in Bird’s forgery #24 the use of the violin has obvious connections to the wooden material of the object used to transcribe Paganini’s notation and the originally intended performer of the notation being transcribed, the use of toy piano as an instrument in my piece is not as conceptually contained. Its use is more the byproduct of practical considerations of resources available to me for the concert series than anything else.

\textsuperscript{27} The recording process of this video documentation is worth tangentially noting. Due to limitations of video recording duration imposed on my camera (for reasons to do with taxation) my performance of effacement had to be cut into ten-minute chunks of time. Because I was focused on the task of cutting out the notation I could not always focus on the how much time had elapsed during a period of cutting. There was one moment where I became particularly taken up in the “excitement of the cut” mentioned before and continued to cut past the point of recording. As a result, I was left with a missing portion of the video
into sections, each marked by the cutting away the last remaining bar of the score.

Jump cuts were made between frames in the video and played back at variable speeds. Some of the cut portions of video documentation were further edited to include correspondingly convolved audio recordings of scissors sounds and samples of toy piano pitches. These cut up remains of the video documentation are interspersed throughout the final piece, and, perhaps akin to some logic of distortion, the videos recur as truncated echoes.\(^{28}\)

documented performance. The recording, it could be metaphorically said, was cut into by an absorption in the act of cutting.

Out of these documentary remains, a “secondary score” was retrospectively composed for the toy pianist that anticipates and re-sounds the cut up documentation. To me, this secondary score functions like a type of glue to bring together the condensed, compressed and effaced remains of the compositional process – the reconfiguration implied by the word découpage. It also allows for structural forms of cutting to takes place between the performer and the documentation.

There are several additional particularities to the constellation of structural, musical, aural and visual cuttings in this piece. Ultimately though, it is my feeling that experiencing Composition with the Sound of Its Own Découpage itself best evidences these particularities. Therefore, instead of comprehensively detailing the specific ways in which all of the forms of effacement and destruction are elaborated in my work, I present the reader with my documentation of the premiere performance given by Eric Gottlieb and a sampling of additional questions that crossed my mind during the creative process.

29 Kim-Cohen, In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-cochlear Sonic Art, 50.
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Perhaps in conjunction with an understanding of the points of influence for my experimentation, an expanded sense of a retrospective compositional practice, and recourse to the piece of work itself, the reader may imaginatively construct their own hypotheses of how or if these questions were resolved...

- What kind of material should I cut?
- On what material should the notation be inscribed?
- What type of scissors would I need in order to execute very fine and detailed cutting?
- Would the cutting of notation be done live?
- If so, would it be the only thing that happens during the live performance?
- If the piece/cutting was performed live, what would that mean in terms of subsequent performances and the durability of the score?
- Would the score need to be materially reproduced for every performance?
- Effacement, ephemerality, destruction, construction?
- Would the notation already contain, embedded into its symbology, information to instruct the cutter as to where, when and how to cut the notation?
- What types of relationships could be developed between musical notation and the sounds of scissors cutting different materials?
- If two notes overlap each other in the visual space of notation, part of one note would be cut out in the process of cutting out the overlapping note. How would this impact on the convolution of audio?
- Is there any significance in cutting the stem of a notehead?
- What if cutting activated smells?

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