

EXPERIENCE



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EXPERIENCE

*Culture
Cognition
and the
Common
Sense*

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FIG. 1A



FIG. 1B



FEELING

Adam Frank

"I think we should start talking again about emotions in music." So begins a 57-minute conversation between American composers Robert Ashley and Alvin Lucier, part of Ashley's 1976 television series *Music with Roots in the Aether* (specifically, the episode titled "Landscape with Alvin Lucier").¹ A rich meditation on emotion in musical composition, performance, and reception, the conversation offers a set of complementary terms that speak directly to debates about the nature of emotion and its role in aesthetic experience. This essay brings "Landscape with Alvin Lucier" together with contemporaneous conceptions of affect in the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins to unfold ideas about feeling in postwar America, and to begin thinking about the expressiveness of technology in experimental aesthetic forms.

Consider the mise-en-scène of Ashley's unusual and deeply enjoyable work of videotaped musical theater. Set in what looks like a warehouse or gymnasium, Ashley and Lucier's conversation (a duet, as Ashley calls it) is staged as an absurd fly-fishing expedition: both men stand around a canoe wearing dark sunglasses, while Ashley drinks a can of beer and Lucier, in full regalia (rod, hat, vest), casts his line across the concrete floor. (FIG. 1A) Two female dancers, Anne Koren and Susan Matheke, perform Lucier's *Outlines of Persons and Things* (1975), a work that explores audible diffraction patterns; one of the dancers scans the interior of the canoe with a directional microphone, while the other moves slowly across the back wall away from a stack of loudspeakers. In addition to the composers' distinctive voices (Lucier's stutter, Ashley's sinuous midwestern drawl), we hear quiet, subtly changing high-pitched electronics throughout, as the dancers create the diffracting sine waves of Lucier's composition. The visual image is flat and fairly bright, with shadows of the performers' bodies visible on the back wall. Philip Makanna's camera occasionally pans or zooms to provide dramatic energy, but there are no cuts or edits, here or in any of the episodes of *Music with Roots in the Aether*. According to Ashley, the series' visual style "comes from the need I felt to find a new way to show music being performed . . . to not editorialize on the time domain of the music through arbitrary space-time substitutions."²

Time is crucial to these composers' thoughts about emotion. Ashley's focus on "the time domain of the music," more specifically,

FIGURE 1

(A) Photograph taken on the set of the work "Landscape with Alvin Lucier," featuring a performance of *Outlines of Persons and Things*, from episode 5 of Robert Ashley's television production *Music with Roots in the Aether*, 1976. (B) Still image from a videotaped performance of Alvin Lucier's *Music for Solo Performer* (1965) at Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT, 1975, from episode 6 of Robert Ashley's television production *Music with Roots in the Aether*, 1976.

1

More accurately, so begins the transcription of this episode in Gisela Gronemeyer and Reinhard Oehlschlägel, eds., *Music with Roots in the Aether* (Edition MusikTexte, 2000), 79. The first words we hear in the television production itself are Lucier's: "When I see anybody doing anything there's an emotional feeling." In the transcription Lucier's words appear just after a brief exchange in which Ashley introduces the topic of emotions in music. This episode, and the entire 14-hour series (including portraits of and videotaped work by David Behrman, Philip Glass, Alvin Lucier, Gordon Mumma, Pauline Oliveros, Terry Riley, and Ashley himself), can be seen on the Penn Sound website: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Ashley.php>.

2

Music with Roots in the Aether, Lovely Music. Online at www.lovely.com. For reviews of Ashley's television series, see Kenneth Goldsmith, "Robert Ashley: Music with Roots in the Aether," *The Brooklyn Rail* (February 1, 2004); Norbert Osterreich, (cont. on page 144)



"Music with Roots in the Aether," *Perspectives of New Music* 16, no. 1 (1977): 214–28; and Arthur J. Sabatini, "ReViewing Robert Ashley's *Music with Roots in the Aether*, the first opera for television," *MFJ* 42 (Fall 2004): 53–66.

3

Robert Ashley, "Variations on the 'Drone': A Non-Timeline Concept, in *Outside of Time: Ideas about Music*, ed. and trans. Ralf Dietrich (MusikTexte, 2009), 114–24.

4

See Michael Nyman's *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; first published 1974) for an early and influential account of this Anglo-American musical tradition. For an interesting revision of the category of experimental music, see Frank X. Mauceri, "From Experimental Music to Musical Experiment," *Perspectives of New Music* 35, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 187–204. Douglas Kahn's *Noise Water Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999) offers an important set of critical discussions of 20th-century sound.

5

Alvin Lucier and Douglas Simon, *Chambers: Scores by Alvin Lucier* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 69.

6

Ibid., 72–73.

7

Ashley, "All Music Can Be Understood," in *Outside of Time*, 216, 218.

8

Kahn, *Noise Water Meat*, 159–60.

9

Robert Ashley, "Landscape with Alvin Lucier," in Gronemeyer and Oehlschlägel, *Music with Roots in the Aether*, 79.

10

Ibid., 80.

11

Lucier and Simon, *Chambers*, 71.

12

Ashley, "Landscape with Alvin Lucier," 83.

13

Ibid.

his concern to represent continuous, uninterrupted duration—what he later calls the "drone"—is central for the work of all the composers portrayed in *Aether*.³ Coming after John Cage and similarly attracted to the philosophical tradition of pragmatism that he helped popularize, these composers worked with sound very differently from the Continental serialist and post-serialist traditions (e.g., Schoenberg, Stockhausen, et al.), with their legacy of European expressionism.⁴ For example, in Lucier's *Music for Solo Performer* (1965), which Ashley included as part of episode 6, electroencephalogram (EEG) scalp electrodes taped to regions of Lucier's head transmit alpha wave signals through a series of amplifiers, causing adjacent percussion instruments to vibrate. We see Lucier's eyelids flutter as he sits, formally dressed, in a grand hall; at the same time, we hear quiet, sporadic percussion sounds. (FIG. 1B) As the score puts it, "Control of the alpha consists simply of alteration of thought content—for example, a shifting back and forth from a state of visual imagery to one of relaxed resting."⁵ Since alpha waves are produced in a wakeful, relaxed state with closed eyes, the sound is literally produced by means of a particular kind of *feeling*. An audience may become engrossed (or bored, or both) while watching and listening to Lucier's attempt to regulate the meditative state needed to produce alpha brainwaves. As one interviewer describes the work: "The performer is performing live but not only isn't he physically manipulating the sound-producing elements in the piece, he can't move. If he moves, he loses the alpha state and there is silence."⁶

While this piece is clearly informed by Cage's ideas (it vexes the opposition between intended and unintended sounds, is indeterminate, and has a score written as a set of technical instructions), Lucier takes those ideas in a different direction. In a lecture at Brooklyn College in 1979, Ashley observed that the music of the composers portrayed in *Aether* is almost always described as "static," and the experience of listening becomes a kind of watchful waiting: "The music creates a non-neutral self-consciousness in the listener. . . . Apparently, the 'static' quality increases the tendency to observe oneself."⁷ If Cage's *4'33"* (1952) famously directs audience attention to the environment of the concert hall as the source of sounds, Ashley implies that works by the next generation of composers encouraged audiences and performers to attend to their own psychophysiological dynamics. This approach at once builds on and moves away from Cage's anti-expressivist aesthetics of silence—which, as Douglas Kahn has argued, depend on specific acts of silencing (of the performer in *4'33"*, for example), "a silencing of the social and ecological within an ever-expanding domain of music."⁸ By contrast, the work of Ashley and his fellow composers sought to be open to social and political noise, and especially to "non-neutral" emotion.

In *Music for Solo Performer* audience members listen to the performer's psychophysiological dynamics—Lucier's amplified



brainwaves—and, in so doing, may attend to their own. Lucier's piece recontextualizes composition, performance, and technology itself: "When you do an EEG on somebody, you hide it. I mean it's in a hospital . . . but I'm interested in . . . what the human situation of that person who's having the EEG is."⁹ He goes on to explain: "What I cared more about was the feeling of the person in that particular situation, okay? The person sitting there without having to make a single muscular motion, yet showing something that you cannot observe from the outside."¹⁰ Lucier's colleagues at Brandeis encouraged him to create a more conventional tape collage using recordings of amplified brainwaves as source material, but he thought this idea less evocative than a live performance that explored technology's relation to the "human situation": "the poetic part of the piece was that at any given moment in time, some person, male or female, is sitting in a medical center with electrodes on his or her scalp, and an analysis is being done of his or her brainwaves to determine whether he or she is going to live or die."¹¹ By juxtaposing the anxiety associated with EEG technology with the calm, relaxed state of mind required by his technical setup, Lucier invites both performer and audience to engage in a kind of spiritual exercise, an encounter, at once intimate and estranging, with the brain as finite signal generator. In this way his composition explores and exploits the expressive capacities of the technology.

As a post-Romantic composer on the American scene, Lucier does not dismiss expression but seeks the expressive capacities of his 20th-century surround: "I don't think of technology as technology," Lucier says to Ashley, "I think of it as landscape. We're born and brought up in a landscape and there's not much I can do about the fact that there are EEG amplifiers."¹² Feeling is crucial for connecting with this landscape: "it's touching: a composer in the 19th century or in another century is talking about the landscape that he's in; the trees and the poetry—and I'm just doing that."¹³ Ashley, too, is fascinated by and committed to the technological artifacts that create the landscape of North American daily life in the 1960s and '70s, especially radio and television.¹⁴ Despite their similarities, however, the two composers characterize emotion in music differently. For Ashley, emotion is "so obviously there, whether I put it in or whether I do it on purpose, and I'm wondering how it gets in," and he uses the idea of projection to understand this: "Every piece has a particular feeling. I thought it would be interesting if you could identify the point where you project that particular thing into your actions."¹⁵ But Lucier denies that he intentionally engages in emotional projection, insisting "It's not true for me to do that, okay? Now what I do instead is to make pieces about natural acoustic phenomena. The way sounds act; the way sounds are."¹⁶ At some point in their conversation Lucier steps away from the word *feelings* ("I don't know if it's feelings, but qualities that I find I like . . . I try to distill these ideas and present them in their purest form").¹⁷ He avoids Ashley's

There is much more to say about Ashley's commitment to television, as well as the role and genealogy of the idea of landscape, than I have space for in this essay. Elsewhere I have begun to explore Gertrude Stein's landscape theater poetics in relation to postwar American experimental theater and music. In her lecture "Plays" (1934), Stein explains that she wrote plays like landscapes to address the problem of "nervousness," or emotional syncopation, between the audience and the events on the stage, that is, the inordinate claim that narrative makes on a listener's attention. She writes, "If a play was exactly like a landscape then there would be no difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being behind or ahead of the play because the landscape does not have to make acquaintance"; or again, "A landscape does not move nothing really moves in a landscape but things are there, and I put into the play the things that were there" (Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1985], 122, 129). Compare this with Ashley's writing on the drone: "Non-timeline music makes no attempts to keep the attention of the listener. It exists as if apart from the attention of the listener. The listener is free to come and go. When the listener attends to the music, there is only the 'sound.' The sound is everything. When the listener is away, the music exists anyway" (*Outside of Time*, 120). For a reading of Stein's landscape poetics in relation to theories of emotion and technologies of graphic reproduction, see Adam Frank, "Loose Coordinations: Theater and Thinking in Gertrude Stein," *Transferral Poetics, from Poe to Warhol* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

Ashley, "Landscape with Alvin Lucier," 79, 81.

Ibid., 79.

Ibid., 81.



18

Ibid., 81.

19

Ibid., 83.

20

See Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) for a sample of approaches to affect that subscribe to one or another of these oppositions. For an excellent review of this reader, see Russ Leo, "An Archive for Affect Theory," *Reviews in Cultural Theory* 2, no. 2 (2011): 1–9.

21

For an introduction to Tomkins and his relevance to the theoretical humanities, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, eds., *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

explicitly emotional terms, but he also avoids a scientizing modernism that would cast his work as experiments in perception, emphasizing instead the aesthetic dimensions of his music: "It's putting people in a beautiful relationship to those phenomena."¹⁸ When Ashley, less embarrassed by subjectivized terms and ideas, asserts, "I feel very strongly that you're trying to do something that makes people feel good. Don't you think of it as being sort of new?" Lucier translates this into a sociopolitical register: "I suppose when you make a piece, you imagine it as a visionary model of how society could be."¹⁹

Subjective feelings versus objective natural phenomena, projection versus purification, emotions versus ethics and aesthetics: readers familiar with the field of affect studies will recognize that these opposed terms continue to structure many of its current discussions.²⁰ Thinking about affect is usefully informed by the work of Silvan Tomkins, whose four-volume *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1962–63, 1991–92) offers an empirically based and conceptually sophisticated theory of affect that remains a promising resource for criticism precisely because it can accommodate these seemingly contradictory terms. Tomkins (1911–1991), whose lifespan is almost identical with that of Cage (1912–1992), also emerged from the context of American pragmatism. He received his PhD in philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania working with (among others) Edgar Singer Jr., a student of William James's, and then pursued postdoctoral work with W. V. O. Quine at Harvard in the 1930s. There he joined Henry Murray's group at the Harvard Psychological Clinic, where projective tests were a major focus; he wrote a book on the Thematic Apperception Test, developed the Tomkins-Horn Picture Arrangement Test, and participated in Murray's attempt to integrate European psychoanalytic theories of development and personality with the empirical methods of American academic psychology. In the 1950s Tomkins encountered the writing of Norbert Wiener on cybernetics, an approach that had already influenced behaviorism, but in Tomkins's case led (perhaps surprisingly) to his development of a systematic, innovative, and challenging theory of affect, which was not always well received in the increasingly narrow, data-oriented discipline of academic psychology.²¹

For the purposes of this short essay, I will emphasize only those aspects of Tomkins's theory of affect that can frame the discussion of feeling I have been exploring thus far. For Lucier and Ashley, feelings are central to musical composition, performance, and reception; for example, we have seen how in *Music for Solo Performer* Lucier maintains a meditative state in order to produce sounds. For Tomkins, the affects—joy, anger, distress, excitement, etc.—constitute the primary motivational system in humans. Feelings literally make things happen. While he contrasted his theory with the psychoanalytic emphasis on instincts or drives, Tomkins proposed that affects (like instincts, in Freud's understanding) are both psychical and physiological: they are biological events (evolutionary programs activated by specific neural profiles) experienced as punishing or rewarding aesthetic

responses. Tomkins found empirical evidence for the positive affects of interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy, for the negative affects of distress-grief, anger-rage, fear-terror, shame-humiliation, and contempt-disgust, and for the resetting affect of surprise-startle (these hyphenated names represent ranges of intensity in his theory). While never committing to a detailed neural account of emotion—in spite of his very general “neural density model” of affect activation—Tomkins’s research supports the view that processes in the thalamus (just above the brainstem) produce both bodily changes and emotional experience almost simultaneously.²² What starts the thalamus off can be internal, external, or a mix of both: a memory, a heard melody, or the “non-neutral self-consciousness” of the listener waiting for Lucier’s brainwaves to provoke a percussive event.

For Tomkins, the affects are fundamentally aesthetic responses that are accompanied by distinct *qualia*: distress feels different than anger, which in turn feels different than excitement. These core affects are not usually experienced in isolation; they are coassembled with (and either amplify or inhibit) drive states, cognitive states, and other affective states to result in complex feelings and emotions. Indeed, if affects are like basic elements in Tomkins’s periodic table, then emotions are complex molecules formed by combining affects with other psychic elements.²³ Such chemical metaphors occur in Tomkins’s writing with some regularity, as they do in “Landscape with Alvin Lucier.” For example, Lucier describes his music this way: “It’s like distilling, making pure those things that happen anyway, but that you don’t perceive because they’re too complicated.”²⁴ Similarly, Tomkins proposes that “Because affects are phenomenologically so soluble in every kind of psychic solution we must expect that the distillation of purified components will be rarely achieved by the individual who experiences the totality.”²⁵ But Tomkins does not consider such distillation of components always possible or even desirable. Consider this call for more integrative experimental protocols in psychology:

We have a great craft union tendency to polarize and to debate things which nature has put together, and to pull them asunder for analytic experimental purposes. That is fine for many aspects of science. But if we want to understand feeling, we had better understand all the things that are conjoined and that have evolved to be conjoined. We can tease them apart, we can factor them, we can centrifuge them, but they remain a unitary phenomenon, which exhibits many diverse characteristics at once. Now that is not fashionable in science. It is called contamination. Unfortunately, we are deeply contaminated creatures.²⁶

For Tomkins, acknowledging the fundamentally contaminated nature of feeling does not obviate the need to explain it scientifically. Rather,

22

Tomkins differed from the James-Lange theory of emotion in his suggestion that the primary organ of affect is the face rather than the viscera (although he linked the face to visceral and other bodily responses through feedback), and argued strongly against the Schachter-Singer model of emotion (the two-factor theory), in which a general physiological arousal is followed by a process of cognitive labeling. The Cannon-Bard theory comes closest. See William James, “What Is an Emotion?” *Mind* 9,34 (1884): 188–205; Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer, “Cognitive, Social, and Physiological Determinants of Emotional State,” *Psychological Review* 69 (1962): 379–99; and W. B. Cannon, “The James-Lange theory of emotion: A critical examination and an alternative theory,” *American Journal of Psychology*, 39 (1927): 106–124.

23

Eve Sedgwick makes this point in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), xi.

24

Ashley, “Landscape with Alvin Lucier,” 81.

25

Silvan Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, Vol. 1 (New York: Springer Publishing, 1962), 175.

26

Silvan Tomkins, “Inverse Archaeology,” in *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*, ed. Virginia Demos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 285.



27

Tomkins, *Affect Imagery
Consciousness* 1, 133–34.

28

Ibid., 134–35.

29

Ashley, “Landscape with Alvin
Lucier,” 86.

Adam Frank

this acknowledgment should lead to an examination of what makes feeling difficult to study using ordinary empiricist methods. For example, in conceptualizing what he calls the freedom of object of the affect system (the fact that any affect may take any object), Tomkins defines what he calls “affect-object reciprocity”: “If an imputed characteristic of an object is capable of evoking a particular affect, the evocation of that affect is also capable of producing a subjective restructuring of the object so that it possesses the imputed characteristic which is capable of evoking that affect. Thus, if I think that someone acts like a cad I may become angry at him, but if I am irritable today then I may think him a cad though I usually think better of him.”²⁷ These are the dynamics of (what psychoanalysis calls) projection and introjection. While a strictly empiricist science must avoid these dynamics insofar as they “contaminate” the object of knowledge, for Tomkins, such dynamics are exactly what affect theory needs to take into account: “There is a real question whether anyone may fully grasp the nature of any object when that object has not been perceived, wished for, missed, and thought about in love and in hate, in excitement and in apathy, in distress and in joy. This is as true of our relationship with nature, as with the artifacts created by man, as with other human beings and with the collectivities which he both inherits and transforms.”²⁸

Both Ashley’s description of how emotions may be projected into compositions and Lucier’s aim to purify acoustic experience can be accommodated in Tomkins’s understanding of affect. As a scientist and theorist, Tomkins is clearly committed to analyzing core affects as separate and distinct from other psychical and physiological elements. At the same time, he recognizes that it is in the nature of affect to become reciprocally confused with their objects *in experience*, a confusion precisely described by the term *feeling* (the haptic sense best captures the interdependence of affects and objects). Both composers accept this fundamental complexity of feeling in experience. But where Lucier, with some ambivalence, wants to separate acoustic forms from feelings, Ashley accepts projection as an inevitable feature of performance and reception, composing in a manner that invites the listener to attend carefully (as the camera in *Aether* does) to affective dynamics and wait for surprising self-relations to come into awareness. But even Lucier’s commitment to purification may be an affective one: “If I’m dealing with acoustical things, I try to get the most elegant meaning, the simplest way of execution. And when I’ve done that, there’s a feeling of simplification and there’s a kind of purifying quality about that feeling.”²⁹ It is entirely unclear from these sentences whether Lucier’s “feeling of simplification” is a consequence or a reciprocal cause of his approach to acoustic phenomena. The feeling, which initially seems to follow the “simplest way of execution,” itself has the effect of “purifying” Lucier’s sense of his own composition—feeling is at once cause and effect.

For Tomkins, there is no choice to be made between the subjectivizing and desubjectivizing aspects of affect: “The logic of the heart

would appear not to be strictly Boolean in form, but this is not to say that it has no structure.”³⁰ Structure is crucial for Tomkins, both the structure of the affect system itself and the relations between the affects and other psychical or cognitive systems. Indeed, the structural independence of the affect system from the purposive or goal-seeking aspects of what he calls “the human feedback system” lets Tomkins begin to account for the seemingly contradictory aspects of affect. At the same time that affects and emotions constitute our sense of self or subjectivity, in his view they also act like “primitive gods within the individual,” motivating actions that we do not intend and that can seem entirely other to our selves.³¹

This aspect of Tomkins’s theory—that affects are at once proximate and strange—permits us to understand subjectivity as fundamentally multiple, without foregoing either the sense of agency that characterizes much of our ordinary minute-to-minute, task-oriented activities, or the sense (available with just the slightest shift of perspective) that we are buffeted by forces from within and without that are beyond our control. “Man is neither as free as he feels nor as bound as he fears,” asserts Tomkins at the beginning of a chapter titled “Freedom of the Will and the Structure of the Affect System.”³² His writing usefully moves us toward a space that does not require the all-or-nothing attitudes of so much theory of the last several decades, and encourages us to think the continuities between our daily lives and our headier cognitive encounters (what so much aesthetics purports to be).

“Landscape with Alvin Lucier” ends with an exchange that emphasizes exactly these kinds of continuities. Ashley asks Lucier to describe what it feels like “when you’ve decided you’ve just made something apart from yourself,” and observes, “You feel less and less well until you start feeling well.”³³ Lucier agrees: “I’m sure it’s anxiety and doubt and all those things and just not having gotten there yet. And then when you do, you feel good when you’ve made something. . . . It’s like an activity without a purpose—with and without a purpose.” When Ashley mishears, Lucier repeats himself and goes on, “I think it’s to clarify and to improve your everyday life. You know, you improve your everyday life and you hope you improve other people’s everyday life.”³⁴ This ordinary, basic statement of purpose for composition (to improve life) does not replace what has come before, the composers’ agreement about those nonpurposive feelings (doubt, anxiety, feeling well) that accompany making something. It is precisely the role of feeling in composition that permits it to be an activity “with and without a purpose”: because affects are motives and not (primarily) goals, according to Tomkins, they can motivate those judgments of value that can establish goals. To put this another way, the experiences of feeling good and doing good, while certainly not identical, have something to do with each other, and something to do with *poesis*. The works of Ashley, Lucier, and Tomkins invite us to keep these continuities of feeling in experience in mind.

30

Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness* 1, 134.

31

Ibid., 144.

32

Ibid., 108.

33

Ashley, “Landscape with Alvin Lucier,” 87.

34

Ibid.

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