

Barbara Held: Breathing and Its Transformations

One of the conventional characteristics of the flute is the “purity” of its tone. Among analog instruments, the flute comes closest to approximating a single sine wave, meaning it has fewer harmonic frequencies or overtones than are produced by, say, an oboe or trombone, or piano. The flute, we might say, “purifies” the human breath: as it passes through the instrument, the human breath is “shaped” by the tube to become a pure tone—purer than, for instance, the human singing voice. For *Pausa*, the exhibition by Barbara Held and Benton C Bainbridge currently on view at Kiehle Gallery in the Visual Art Center, Held’s flute playing instigates an audio-visual installation on three video monitors and four speaker channels. In this work, Held plays, then freezes a pixel of flute sound on her laptop and modulates its limited harmonic frequencies, in effect making the instrument’s “purity” impure. Like many of the works Held performs, the flute initiates a circuit. Here specifically, small microphones in Bainbridge’s modular video synthesizer record the already-modulated pixel of flute sound; the modular synth divides that audio information into its component frequencies and translates it into changes in the horizontal, vertical, and brightness components of the video output.

Held describes the flute as “transparently breath-like.”¹ The instrument merely splits the breath. This would be in contrast to a reed or brass instrument, both of which add vibration to the breath stream. The directness of the breath stream through the tube of the flute would be another kind of purity. By contrast, Held states: “I love the breathiness and imperfection of the instrument. That’s also why I was so happy when Yasunao Tone was the first to make me an obnoxious flute piece!”² The piece she is talking about is “Trio for Flute Player” of 1985, which is in today’s program; it was later recorded for Held’s 1992 CD *Upper Air Observation*, released on Mimi Johnson’s record label Lovely Music. “I was actually a bit disappointed with the CD version of the piece

because I played too melodically,” Held relates; “it’s a lot more interesting when it’s strict and the sounds are more noisy.”³

Three of the pieces in tonight’s program were composed by Tone, who was a co-founder of Group Ongaku, a postwar Japanese music collective whose members included Takehisa Kosugi, Mieko Shiomi, and Yoko Ono. He was also an original member of Fluxus. The trajectory of Tone’s career, which dates back to the early 1960s and continues today, reveals much about Held’s own aesthetics. Tone’s earliest works were open-ended scores, such as *Smooth Event* of 1963. That score simply gave the instructions: “Smooth any form of cloth.” Tone explains:

The first performance of the piece was done as a duo performance with Takehisa Kosugi at Tokyo Gallery in 1963. I covered him with a big white sheet of cloth and smoothed the wrinkles of the cloth with my hands. The second performance was in a room in Nikkatsu Kokusai Hotel, where I ironed a radio inside my shirt. Kosugi then crept inside a big white cloth bag and I ironed him.⁴

Solo performances of this piece usually involve an electric guitar.

Beginning with the 1976 piece *Voice and Phenomenon*, Tone has consistently used ancient Chinese and Japanese poems to instigate his pieces. Those poems, from the Shijing, Toshihen, and Man’Yoshu, are converted from their written form “back” into sound by way of a series of conversions. 1982’s *Molecular Music* took the written characters from the Shijing and Man’yoshu poems and matched them with found photographs from *National Geographic* magazines that corresponded to the etymological meanings of the pictographic characters. The photographs were collected into a slideshow that was projected in the rhythm of how the poems would be read. Light sensitive oscillators on the projection screen converted the projected light into electronic sounds. 1992’s *Musica Iconologos* features scans of photographs that correspond to the characters of two poems from the *Shijing*; the pixels of the scans are tabulated as histograms and then converted into 20 millisecond bursts of sound that were then expanded to a length corresponding to the

etymological complexity of the original written character. In *Wounded Soutai Man'yo* of 2002 Tone wrote lines from a *Man'yōshū* poem on a tablet with a stylus; as soon as he lifted his stylus from the tablet, the calligraphy turned into a wave form. Over the last eight years, Tone has been creating what he calls *MP3 Deviations*, which take MP3 sound files that are derived from ancient poems and transform them using a program that corrupts the files.

What all of these pieces have in common is a conversion of notation to sound through a circuit. The sound that results at the end of the circuit, in each case, is unpredictable to the performer—or “de-controlled,” to use Tone’s term. The early 1960s event scores, a compositional strategy also used by artists such as Alison Knowles, George Brecht, Yoko Ono, and Dick Higgins, are perhaps the germ of Tone’s eventual work with the circuit. Art historian Liz Kotz writes: “. . . [in an event score] the relationship between a notational system and a realization is not one of representation or reproduction but of specification: the template, the schema, or score is usually not considered the locus of the ‘work,’ but merely a tool to produce it; and while the ‘work’ must conform to certain specifications and configurations, its production necessarily differs in each realization.”²⁵ In Tone’s work with prepared CDs beginning in 1985 and in his current work with MP3s, the audio medium is altered so that the resulting sounds that are played back are different in each instance, as opposed to being identical, which is what audio playback media (especially *digital* audio media) are supposed to enable.

In *Trio for Flute Player*, Tone superimposed musical staves on calligraphic renderings of the 8th century Japanese *Man'YōShū* poems, the earliest surviving literary texts in that language. Held, for whom *Trio* was composed, executes these musical scores on a prepared flute. She performs the score in two ways: reading the poems, as translated into English by the poet Cid Corman, through the mouthpiece of the flute; and playing the calligraphically-rendered poems-turned-sheet music. That playing has two simultaneous “outputs,” so to speak; not only did Held’s breath stream play notes, her fingering performed a second function: the keys of her prepared flute were outfitted with

foam pads, which when depressed altered the strength of an electric current connected to an oscillator, which changed the pitch and intensity of the sound emanating from the oscillator. In his liner notes to the piece, Tone writes that “The poems are not interpreted but transformed into sound.”⁶ In all, *Trio for a Flute Player* features three transformations of those poems via Held’s instrument: spoken (which is also to say, breathed), keyed (through the oscillator), and in Held’s “normal” flute performance a combination of breathing and keywork.

Instead of treating the Japanese characters on the musical staves as notes, Held chose to read the notations as tablature, the five lines and four white spaces on the musical staff corresponding to the flute’s nine finger positions. Held describes her process of non-interpretive playing as a “channeling”: “I try to focus on the task I have set for myself . . . it’s a sort of state that you enter. As your eyes scan the score, the thinking and analyzing mind goes into hibernation, and the music flows through.”⁷ She has described *Self-Portrait*, the piece in today’s program written for her by Alvin Lucier, similarly: “it was kind of an athletic challenge. It’s very hard to play really softly from quite a distance and get the little fan to go around, so I wasn’t thinking of much other than the task at hand: of choosing notes in terms of what air speeds worked well with the anemometer rather than making musical choices.”⁸ In both of these pieces, the difficulty of the composition (the score in *Trio* and the device in *Self-Portrait*) presents an obstacle that blocks virtuosity and what we would conventionally call “musicality.” Furthermore, in *Self-Portrait*, musical decisions are made to best complete the task of making the anemometer’s fan blades move, not what will sound a certain way. Here, the resulting sounds are perhaps not unpredictable in the sense of Tone’s other circuitous compositions, but they are the product of Held’s diminished capacity to control the sounds she is playing in the sense that she is almost unable to *intend* a specific sound before she plays it outside of what the score dictates.

I’ve never asked Held or Tone, but my sense of what brought them together in their fruitful collaboration of the second half of the 1980s is breathing—specifically a shared interest in the

transformation of the breath. Almost all of Tone's work since 1976 has begun with the written characters of ancient Chinese or Japanese poems. But before those poems were collected in anthologies and formalized as written texts, they were songs. Before they were converted to systems of writing, these songs were instigated by the human breath. In 1984, Held organized a series of flute concerts in New York called *Shaping the Breath*. The flute, she explains, is a device that shapes the breath—in fact, as I said at the beginning of this talk, *purifying* it. *Pausa*, the exhibition in Kiehle Gallery in the Visual Art Center (St. Cloud State University, Minnesota), extends the breath not only through an electronic, technological circuit, but also through another analog device that shapes it. That device is architecture. The modulated flute sounds that emanate from the installation's four speaker channels interact with each other through the unique spatial dimensions and sonorities of the gallery space, which contains an obstacle—an obtrusive pillar—right in the center of the gallery space. If the flute purifies the breath, the room enriches the breath's impurities before it reenters the circuit. The microphones in Bainbridge's modular synthesizer records the interacting modulated flute sounds as they takes shape in the space, and uses the resulting data to in turn re-shape his video images.

¹ Alexandra Alisaukas and Godfre Leung, "Interview with Barbara Held," in *The Third Rail* 10 (2017): 31.

² *Ibid.*, 30.

³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴ Email correspondence with the author, November 17, 2013.

⁵ Liz Kotz, “Language Between Performance and Photography,” in *October* 111 (Winter, 2005), pp. 14–15.

⁶ Yasunao Tone, “*Trio for a Flute Player and Lyrictron*,” in liner notes to Barbara Held, *Upper Air Observation* (Lovely Music, 1991).

⁷ Alisauskas and Leung, 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.