

BARBARA HELD

Interviewed by Alexandra Alisauskas and Godfre Leung



Barbara Held performing Self-Portrait by Alvin Lucier. Photo by Ellen Band.

—— Godfre Leung: On your CD *Upper Air Observation* (Lovely Music, 1991) there is quite a difference between the first piece, *Vara* by Nils Vigeland, which is dated 1979, and those that follow, which were composed in the late '80s and early '90s. That first piece is so “musical” in comparison to the ones that followed. Can you say a little bit about your formal training and how you moved artistically in to the work you were doing in the period when you released your CD?

—— Barbara Held: Nils Vigeland was a composition student of Morton Feldman. We started a new music group called the Bowery Ensemble on his initiative, and Feldman was very supportive. We played a lot of his music, and John Cage was also a big presence. Nils and I found ourselves in a strange place — he's a composer who writes notes (he later apologized for *Vara* as having been written for the “steam flute,” meaning too many notes and notation and not enough awareness of what it means to play the instrument), and he comes from the old fashioned kind of musical training of being able to play anything on the piano: church music, the artisan tradition — he's someone who really knows music. I'm an “interpreter” — I was trained to play my instrument well, to lovingly bring out the music of a composer's score, and to be a good sight-reader. Feldman was one of the last great composers to make incredibly new and beautiful music for interpreters. Everything is in the score, but you have to play it with a new openness to sound, a new feeling for the rhythm of the whole piece that isn't in a traditional classical meter. The other music that I was interested in was more conceptual, mostly by composer-performers who played their own music and didn't need an interpreter. Alvin Lucier, Yasunao Tone — this is a new way to make a score that calls for an action, that isn't the old hierarchy of composer-interpreter-audience member.

So, that's a long way around saying that I chose to play that old piece of Nils's on the CD for its “body.” In that piece he was working out ideas about rhythms that later got much more freely

notated and for me more interesting.

—— Alexandra Alisauskas: Can you say more about your role in reorganizing this hierarchy of composer-interpreter-audience member through your interpretations of those indeterminate scores? I'm thinking of a work like Lucier's *Self-Portrait* (1990). I'll quote the description in your CD's liner notes: “a flutist stands several feet from a wind anemometer. A light is beamed through it, from the opposite side. As the flutist plays long tones toward the anemometer, streams of air from the lip of the flute cause its blades to spin at various speeds, hiding and revealing parts of her body.” The “self” in the title is not the composer, but the performer. What strikes me about this piece is the connection it makes between sound and light, through the physical apparatus of the anemometer, and your role as performer in serving as both mediator and object of that process.

—— Held: Your observations about Alvin's piece, about the sound and light, and the performer as mediator and object are beautiful. I don't remember exactly how it came about that he made the piece for me — I must have talked to him about commissioning a piece — but what I do remember like it was yesterday was receiving a package in the mail with his beautiful anemometer, and a note suggesting that I experiment with it in the breath stream of the flute and let him know what happened. I've never thought about it so much in terms of the physical performance, but 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.

I have been so lucky to have had contact with such interesting artists who have proposed a “piece” that was such a perfect idea, an experience. One was Alvin's *Self-Portrait*, another by a Catalan poet named Joan Brossa: a poetic action that was more theatrical but magical — I was asked to play with a mirror on the music

stand with my back to the audience, moving in and out of the reflection in the mirror as I played.

—— Alisaukas: Along the same lines, I'm interested in hearing more about your collaboration with Lewis deSoto at the MIT Wind Tunnel in 1998. Was this work scored or improvised? Can you talk a bit about how you "play" the flute in the wind tunnel (with its own mechanized "breath")?

—— Held: Lewis deSoto's proposal was such an amazing idea. He had a residency at MIT, and was doing a piece around his discovery of *An Atlas of a Brain* by a Japanese neurologist, a collection of photos of a dissection of his musician wife's brain. I guess looking for something...

We did the experiment in the wind tunnel, which was a huge empty space like a donut with an open cut where they tested airplane wings in the World War II era. The air was controlled by a computer, and it started with just a little breath and made a beautiful, really slow, perfectly gradual crescendo to a speed where I could hardly stand up. We had hoped that the flute would play automatically with the wind and it did, at first just small breathy sounds as I turned it around looking for the air, and eventually screeching away. There was no score and no improvisation. Really, it was an experiment. The interesting coincidence was that it produced a melody that turned out to be the same as a Japanese flute piece about a monk in a boat in the middle of a lake who hears flutes coming from all sides through the fog.

—— Leung: Can you speak about the human breath as the anchor to your work, and about your explorations into the various ways it can be transformed and extended, via flute or other means?

—— Held: The influence of Asian music, especially Japanese, was huge after Cage and others "discovered" it. Having permission to use breathy, noisy sounds was a big deal: the noise around the sounds, the spaces between sounds.

In Japan, the performance of the shakuhachi flute is all about meditation, and that has made a huge difference in the way we play. Instrumentalists are divided into those who play lots of notes and those who sit and listen to the sound. I've always been one of the latter; 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!

I curated a little series of concerts years ago in New York. All flutists. We called it *Shaping the Breath* (1984), at Ned Rothenberg's suggestion. I think he said it was a Japanese concept about playing the flute, that it's just an empty tube that shapes the breath.

—— Alisaukas: I'm also thinking of another performance, *Singing Flames* (1995), in which the physical labor of breathing is outsourced, so to speak, to the operation of a scientific apparatus and flames. Can you talk a little bit more about the use of mechanical apparatuses in your practice?

—— Held: The *Singing Flames* apparatus was so attractive (to many other artists as well) because it's invisible: just air and a flame. I love the way that John Tyndall and the other scientists at the Royal Society built those experiments to make magic show performances demonstrating the beauty of natural phenomena. The University of Barcelona, where I teach, has lots of these original pieces lying around in hallways and cupboards. They let me use this period set of Helmholtz resonators for my class last year. So beautiful!

One of the most interesting pieces I've played was an interactive score called *Electric Wind* by Ron Kuivila, a brilliant composer who has been a colleague of Lucier's at Wesleyan University for years, and is now head of the music department there. It mostly uses something called a comb filter, which only lets certain frequencies go through, like a comb. There were really pure electronic sounds playing from the patch, but the breath of the flute or just blowing on the mic

would filter them out.

—— Leung: One of the first things you said to me when we first came into contact through my research on Yasunao Tone was “I’m just the flute player.” Of course, you were much more than that in your collaborations with Tone and Nancy Zendora. One of the most interesting things about those works for me is the germ in Tone’s compositional practice to take the 8th century Japanese *Man’yōshū* poems, in their guise as the earliest surviving written poems in that language, and to convert them “back” to more bodily forms through your flute performances and Nancy’s choreography and dance performances. Before those poems were “converted” to written texts through the Japanese written language, they were songs and at least some of them would probably also have involved dance. You mention Cage, and one of his colleagues at Black Mountain College, the poet-turned-potter M.C. Richards, and one of his successors, the poet Charles Olson, were also very interested in breath. Olson and several of his peers, such as Denise Levertov and Robert Creeley, reimagined the lyricality of lyric poetry through the rhythms of breathing. Richards, in her famous book *Centering*, proposed breathing to be a “transformation of life energy” that united poetry and pottery as utopian craft-based practices.

As one follows the trajectory of your career, the breath, via flute, and then via other operations — both scores and machines — undergoes a transformation or conversion into a different kind of sound. Scores and machines “re-shape the breath,” to tweak Ned Rothenberg’s phrase. For instance, in your very recent work with Benton C Bainbridge, your breath instigates the piece, both through the sound of the flute and in controlling your Moog synthesizer, both of which Benton then modifies for the piece’s audio and video outputs.

—— Held: When I was four years old, my mother got sick with polio at the very end of one of the big epidemics. She spent many months in an iron lung, and my younger sister and I

were sent to live with relatives far away and not allowed to visit her. When she died, I found something that had become one of my deepest memories: a 2-track reel-to-reel tape that my father had made as a family letter. He recorded my mom in the iron lung, and then everyone in the family added some kind of little message, mostly talking about the hot mid-western weather (it was August), the crops, the corn, the beans. The voices are incredible, including my own child voice singing “In the Good Old Summertime,” but what I remember is mom’s voice, speaking in the rhythm of the iron lung that was making her breathe.

I used all that sentimental material in a sound collage piece called *Upper Air Observation*, but what has impacted me the most was the alarm or fear or whatever feeling it is that stays in that artificial breathing. I guess that it wasn’t a coincidence that I choose an instrument that is so transparently breath-like.

About breath in general, I think, like the Black Mountain artists, that we can’t help making things that come from our natural body rhythms, especially the heart and breath, that are really one thing. One of my favorite sounds is the way string quartets use their breathing to stay together. You’re not supposed to hear it. A composer named Charlie Morrow has a beautiful song setting for solo voice of an English translation by Jerome Rothenberg of Juan de la Cruz’s poem “Dark Night.” The breathing is notated in the score: long breath in, long breath out, musical phrase, breath. He has another fun piece for ocarina that is only the instruction to play each phrase as long as one breath. I performed it while having a gallbladder attack, and the phrases were tiny gasps.

At one time I read a lot about symbolism in music and the origin of music. There was a German musicologist named Marius Schneider who wrote a book called *El Origin Musical de los Animales-Simbolos en la Mitologia y la Escultura Antiguas*. He was here in Barcelona somehow between the wars, without any of his notes or research material, and he had a

sort of revelation visiting the Catalan Romanesque monasteries, which led him to decipher the animal carvings on the cloisters of these churches according to ancient Hindu symbolic correspondence with animal/time of day/color/musical note, discovering that the animal carvings spelled out the notes of the hymn of each church. One other idea that I loved from his book was that the real origin of sacrifice is the praise song, that uses one after another of the breaths allotted to us in our lifetime, to sing praise.

The way I love to play the flute is totally based on the breathiness of the sound, loud blowing without tone, and tiny sounds that are practically inaudible, the sound of the breath itself, not only its rhythm. I learned a lot of the techniques from Japanese and Korean composers, and also from a wonderful composer named Eleanor Hovda, who spent years observing flute players and notating the small sounds. She worked a lot with dance, so her music had a rhythm of long phrases and silence, using the breath going out and going in. Very soft, but noisy.

I played a piece by Mauricio Kagel called *Atem* that was a soundtrack recorded by the flutist with all the maintenance sounds of the instrument. I found this text that he wrote about the weird tech repair guy who inspired the piece.

Almost everything I know I learned from Tone. He is so totally radical, and it just made sense to me. His work with transformation, or translation, was a big influence on me, and also his focus on non-intentionality. I love having been part of his process of conversion of those texts. I am remembering the film piece *Molecular Music* (1982–85) — all those beautiful human images, being transformed into the rhythm of the voice by the irritating oscillator, like the flute sound in the first piece he wrote for me, *Trio for Flute Player* (1985). He wouldn't be so interested in the sensuous of breath, at any rate.

—— Leung: Thanks so much for sharing that amazing story about your mother. I have been listening a lot to *Upper Air Observation* the last

few days, as it's taken on a whole new meaning for me. I only was able to read the Catalan epigraph by Carles Hac Mor in the liner notes through primitive Google translation, but the phrases “tecnologiques, i alhora intimes, corporals” and “una simfonia insolita i quotidiana, mecanica i guttural” are so beautiful and suggestive.^[1] It really resonated with me as I was listening to the CD on repeat while driving home to Minneapolis from work up in St. Cloud yesterday afternoon.

On my way home I like to take the slightly slower route, leaving St. Cloud on Highway 10 and crossing through Monticello, via 11, to get back on I-94. Which is basically to say that I go a little out of my way to enjoy the natural landscape as I drive alongside huge agricultural fields on 11 and then cross the Mississippi in Monticello instead of just taking the awful interstate the entire way. Sometimes when it's especially windy, as it was yesterday, I have to steer my car against the wind or it swerves, which is something I've never experienced outside of the great flatness of Minnesota. The memories recorded on that 2-track tape of the weather and crops must have been where you grew up, in Buffalo, Minnesota, right by where I was steering against the wind, right?

And as a total sidenote, I can't help but notice how much of so many things we're talking about, and I think so much within your work, is connected to the old classical allegory of the self-playing or wind-controlled Aeolian harp.

—— Held: It's so wonderful to imagine you driving through that countryside! What I love most is the open horizon, 360 degrees. Even when there are clouds, they are like a plate over the flat. Actually, the events that were being related on my family tape were taking place in Iowa, where my parents were studying at Iowa State University. Slightly different landscape but it's the same Midwest. I think that more than the Willa Cather natural setting, I was pretty much fixated on the gadgets again. I'm embarrassed to say it, but I guess I've been doing the same piece for years — and yes, the

Benton collaboration with his Lisa Joy instrument is a lot like that too.

In *Upper Air Observation*, the weather balloons relay data by means of a four-note pattern that changes as the balloon rises through the air, and they relay the tune back by radio connection. At the time I had a pretty simple vision of air, but was also looking up! So most of my life looking for divine inspiration with the Aeolian harp! The weather man from the new Catalan TV station came to visit me in New York when I was doing this project, and I asked him to make a statement about air, the weather — even he, like my relatives, had only a pretty pithy statement to make: “Wind is just moving air.” I did have a great poetic moment sitting in the parking lot of the Newark airport with a Radio Shack special air controllers’ recording device, listening to them talking about “cranes on runway 3.” I was excited, because I thought it was about Chinese paintings, but then realized that they were talking about construction cranes.

—— Leung: What you said about Marius Schneider is so interesting because some years ago, when I was asking Tone about his use of ancient Chinese poems, he launched into professorial mode and very methodically taught me about the ancient Chinese shamans, who would divine the future by carving pictures on animal bones or turtle shells. They would then heat the bones or shells with fire until the surfaces of the bone would crack, transforming the pictures into something resembling written characters. The shamans would then interpret, or “read,” if you will, the resulting images as an oracle — so a mythical origin of East-Asian writing, before they started inscribing actual written characters on bone during the Shang dynasty. I’m probably not doing justice to this, but I think that was the gist.

But I wonder if he was also interested in the “sensuousness of breath” after all. In *Trio for Flute Player*, the composition begins with Tone’s calligraphic writing of the *Man’yōshū* poems onto musical staves, which you then “read” not as musical notes but as tablature,

as finger placements, translating the five lines of the staff into your hands’ five fingers. But it feels very important to me that the end result in *Trio* is motivated by your breath, through the flute, before the oscillator further translates that sound signal into what we hear. The source material is poems, after all. When you performed the piece, did you think about your “reading” of the score as a kind of mechanical operation, or would there be a sort of more classical reading-as-interpretation going on?

—— Held: I wish that I had something more inspiring to say about the breath, but I think that we are somehow back to my feeling of channeling, of something flowing through me as a performer. I guess it really is a pretty Romantic way of thinking, the idea of “inspiration from above.” With a piece like Tone’s or Alvin’s, it’s not about inspiration and expressing yourself, but of carrying out an action and being surprised at what comes out, which is different every time.

When I play Tone’s piece I try to focus on the task I have set for myself, using high and low lines to indicate high and low finger movement, subverting what would normally be coordinated finger gestures that produce predictable note relationships. The finger movements are also playing the oscillator, which is quite loud, so it all makes a lot of noise. The results should be more “found” and not interpreted. I was actually a bit disappointed with the CD version of the piece because I played too melodically; it’s a lot more interesting when it’s strict and the sounds are more noisy.

When I talk about channeling as a performer, I mean 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. Reading any kind of score is like that; it’s different than improvisation. I’m not a great improviser, so I don’t go into that kind of flow. I have to think hard, probably the great creative improvisers do that, but it’s still different from score reading. Scores such as Alvin’s are actually making a notation of the performer’s physical

gestures or actions, so it isn't so much about expression and feeling, but what is found.

This is also connected to what I imagine deep meditation to be like. On my trip to Tibet this summer, most of the time was spent being overwhelmed with the physical challenges of traveling through that terrain, but at one point when we were stranded in a mountain village waiting for planes to be able to take off again, I, the flat plains Minnesotan, had a sort of vision of what I was reading about Tibetan spiritual practice, and an emptiness in the body where the mountains were somehow inside.

—— Alisauskas: I love the way you speak of the body of the performer as a channel for this transposition. What strikes me about the story about your mother, as well as your story of playing the Charlie Morrow piece while having a gallbladder attack is that, in both cases, your piece or performance has to do with the limits or breakdown of the body. Earlier in our conversation we discussed post-Cage and Fluxus scores as a way out of the conventional composer–interpreter–audience member dynamic. In that vein, could you say more about your work with gadgets, or “interfaces,” and what possibilities they open up in your composition or performance?

As a related question, I would love to hear more about your work with installation, for instance your recent installation with Benton *Observatory/Lisa Joy* (2016). From what I understand the original *Observatory* piece uses numerical data as its basis, and is further filtered through an information-based system. In looking at other installation works of yours, so much of it seems to be about mapping or building the particularities of a given space. Can you speak more about your work or interest in installation in relation to performance?

—— Held: Musical instruments and other kinds of interface are what connect us to other musicians and those who are listening to or experiencing the vibrations that we produce. I love the way Micah Silver talks about how

audio creates an atmosphere in air over time, acoustic space as an interface. Instrumentalists are always aware of that shared space; I always enjoy the way sound changes as I pass through rooms. My first searches for collaborations with artists making projected images came from a desire to include light and vision in that space surrounding the sounds. For example, my exhibition *Possibility of Action: The Life of the Score* (MACBA, 2008) included Eugènia Balcells's *Clear Music* score (1981), which is a series of transparencies with musical staves printed on them and clear objects that move freely in relation to the lines, projected to a wall.

My collaboration with Benton is still in process, but I'm really enjoying the directness of the relationship. We are using similar instruments to synthesize and process image and sound (Eurorack video modules and a small Moog synthesizer modulated with acoustic flute sound), and everything is folding back, in and out. He is interested in portraits, so even the images of our hands and faces are going into the mix. His A/V modules make sound or image equally. He can send me audio frequencies that I can use as what's called a control voltage: information that can be used to modulate the sound I am making. My acoustic flute or my synthesized sounds can go into the mix of what is modulating the images that he is making. In the installation that is part of the Madrid show *Escuchar con los ojos: Arte sonoro en España, 1961–2016* (Fundación Juan March, 2016), Benton's instrument, which he calls Lisa Joy, is a fairly simple extension of the translation of data that creates my generative sound installation and converts one natural phenomenon into another: numeric data of solar oscillations into the math of the harmonic series over a pixel of flute sound. His drawings are not a totally direct interaction with the sound. He creates a calligraphy of shapes and lines with the synthesizer module that then is modified by the sound input from a small mic inside the synthesizer that divides that information into its component frequencies and translates it into changes in the horizontal, vertical, and brightness components of the drawing.

Interestingly, Lisa Joy is named for Lissajous figures, which are named for Jules Antoine Lissajous, a French physicist who developed a method of visualizing waves by using a small mirror on a vibrating object such a tuning fork, which is another of the gadgets I love. (I have a collection of books from the era, by John Tyndall and Spanish equivalents, with these wonderful illustrations. The Royal Society was organizing soirées to demonstrate the new scientific discoveries about the way light and sound work, and they used these apparatuses to demonstrate, which was like something between performance and magic show.)

Right now, Benton and I are working on *Pausa*, a piece for St. Cloud in March to make an installation that is partially performed, which keeps the seed of the performed sound and

video images, and continues to generate new relationships. We're thinking of ways of using that late winter light and reflection of snow in the gallery window when we make our piece. I started trying to combine performance and installation this last fall when I was asked to participate in the Signal Festival in Cagliari, Sardinia. The theme of the festival was silence, so I proposed to start from zero, playing the flute into a computer patch that recorded and manipulated the sounds, eventually generating sound as an ongoing installation.

[1] "Technological and yet intimate and corporeal"; "an uncommon symphony of our daily life, at once mechanical and guttural." Our thanks to Felip Costagliole for his translation of these passages into English.