

## Chapter 8

# Finding Oneself: Alvin Lucier and the Phenomenal Voice

Sound and space are inextricably connected, interlocked in a dynamic through which each performs the other, bringing aurality into spatiality and space into aural definition. This plays out in acoustical occurrence whereby sound sets into relief the properties of a given space, its materiality and characteristics, through reverberation and reflection, and, in turn, these characteristics affect the given sound and how it is heard. There is a complexity to this that overrides simple acoustics and filters into a psychology of the imagination. For example, if we think of the voice as a sound source, we usually imagine it coming from a single individual that the voice then refers back to, as an index of the one who speaks. The subject then becomes the object to which the sound belongs. Yet to shift this perspective slightly is to propose that what we hear is less the voice itself and more the body from which the voice resonates, and that audition responds additionally to the conditions from which sounds emerge, such as the chest and the resonance of the oral cavity. And further, the sound source makes apparent the surrounding location against which emergence occurs, from outside the body and to the very room in which the body is located. This slight shift overturns the sound source as a single object of attention, as body of sound, and brings aurality into a broader field of consideration by introducing the *contextual*. Sound not as object, but as space.

In conjunction with my explanation here, which emphasizes acoustic experience outside the domain of musical composition or design, much attention has been paid to "sound architecture" within the domain of the acousmatic tradition (discussed in Chapter 2). In working with electronics and sound reproduction technology, and supplanting the conventions of concert presentation with that of surround-sound "cinema for the ears," the acousmatic tradition has sought to define sound in relation to a notion of architecture (whether a concert setting or

sound studio) as a means for controlling, manipulating, and ultimately presenting "sound objects." This notion though, while offering a helpful vocabulary in describing sound material, the building of sound objects, and their "morphology" and "dynamic" in actual space, leaves behind some of the more overt social and relational concerns I am seeking, and that the voice necessarily delivers.<sup>1</sup>

It would seem that the sound space interplay demands a shift in definition or attention when heard in relation to speech, for what we hear in the voice that speaks within a given space is not so much an acoustical body but an individual as he or she is pressed upon, responds to, and affected by situations, and inside of which speaking takes shape. The term "context" is thus useful to outline or open up the purely acoustical to forms of "social architecture," derived from the relational dynamics at play within any given space or environment. Context presses in, as social pressure, as architectural presence, and as psychic intensity, modulating and partially sculpting, through its contours of interaction, the movements of the voice.

Vito Acconci's work intersects voice and architecture by performing social confrontations indicative of the visual arts milieu of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In conjunction, we can witness parallel developments in the domain of experimental music following on the heels of John Cage and Fluxus, as in the groups MEV, Scratch Orchestra, AMM, and The Sonic Arts Union, whose work could be said to engage more overt and explorative forms of performance. The Sonic Arts Union is one of the more adventurous indications of experimental music's ambition to further the scope of sonic and acoustic experience and musical strategy of this time. Bringing together Robert Ashley, David Behrman, Alvin Lucier, and Gordon Mumma, the Union was developed through shared interests leading to works that "partly had to do with homemade electronics, partly with exploration of the nature of acoustics, partly with crossing the lines between theatre, visual arts, poetry and music."<sup>2</sup> Such interests predisposed it to live performance, and in 1966 the quartet toured the United States and Europe, each artist performing the others' works.

Having studied at Yale University and Brandeis University throughout the 1950s, Alvin Lucier's work and career has been characterized by a continual fascination and explorative pursuit of how sound works as physical phenomena. As James Tenney observes, "Lucier has always taken great care to design his pieces so that their physical character was not obscured."<sup>3</sup> This is unquestionably a significant element, for the physical character is, to a great degree, the entire point of his work. Tenney's use of the word "design," rather than "compose" or "write," also seems to signal an understanding of Lucier's work, in so far as "designing music" highlights concern for physical phenomena and the possibility of music playing a role in revealing such phenomena. Through such perspective, the processional features that Lucier's works often embody can be understood. Forms of composition operate more as structures through which experiments can be conducted, ultimately bringing forward existing phenomena through what might be called "poetic science."

Lucier's long list of compositions of the last thirty-five years extends, the scope of experimental music to engage sound as a physical medium, the contexts of its experience, and how hearing and location activate one another. Through very simple means and approach, the works activate complex and compelling situations in which sound gains in material presence. "His pieces deal with virtually the whole range of natural acoustical phenomena, including sound transmission and radiation . . . reflection . . . diffraction . . . resonance . . . standing waves . . . feedback . . . beats . . . and speech."<sup>4</sup> The categories of physical phenomena and their relation to auditory events function as subject matter in Lucier's work, and yet Tenney's list of categories seems to strangely end with "speech." For speech, while physical phenomena, is also dramatically unlike feedback, beats, or reflection. Speech brings with it a whole set of extra ingredients; that is, it drags into the realm of pure physical phenomena the presence of language and the inherent complexities of what it means to speak. Tenney's introduction of "speech" unquestionably refers to the composer's seminal *I am sitting in a room* (1969), which continues today to be discussed, performed, and revered as exemplary of an experimental form of musical practice. Working with voice and sound reproduction, the composition stages a number of complex actions, in which the voice as audible media may be engaged. The score reads as follows:

"I am sitting in a room" (for voice and electromagnetic tape, 1969)

Necessary Equipment:

One microphone, two tape recorders, amplifier, and one loudspeaker.

Choose a room the musical qualities of which you would like to evoke. Attach the microphone to the input of tape recorder #1. To the output of tape recorder #2 attach the amplifier and loudspeaker. Use the following text or any other text of any length:

"I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech. I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have."

Record your voice on tape through the microphone attached to tape recording #1. Rewind the tape to its beginning, transfer it to tape recorder #2, play it back into the room through the loudspeaker and record a second generation of the original recorded statement through the microphone attached to tape recorder #1. Rewind the second generation to its beginning and splice it onto the end of the original recorded statement on tape recorder #2. Play the second generation only back into the room through the loudspeaker and record a third generation of the original recorded statement through the microphone attached to the tape recorder #1. Continue this process through many generations.

All the generations spliced together in chronological order make a tape composition the length of which is determined by the length of the original statement

and the number of generations recorded. Make versions in which one recorded statement is recycled through many rooms. Make versions using one or more speakers of different languages in different rooms. Make versions in which, for each generation, the microphone is moved to different parts of the room or rooms. Make versions that can be performed in real time.<sup>5</sup>

By replaying the recording of his voice back into a room, rerecording and playing back, repeating the process, the work develops into an accentuation of acoustic space whereby the sound source (voice) loses its original shape through the resonance of the spatial situation. Here, sound and its source diffuse into a larger conversational interaction in which the voice makes apparent the surrounding architecture through its disembodied reproduction. Over the course of the work's process, the original recording dissolves into a long, moving tone, punctuated, as Lucier points out, by rhythm alone—for we can still make out the general impression of the original spoken text: its inflected edges, the moments of pause, and Lucier's stutter. What we hear, then, is phenomenal in so far as space is articulated by sound, yet imbued with an uncertain psychological imperative, for as Lucier's voice stutters, the work is a process through which any speech impediment (in this case, his stuttering) may smooth out. The stutter though inexplicably stands out. As the syncopation of body and space, as a jag in the surface of the speaking subject, the stutter hovers throughout the forty-five minutes of recording. In essence, the stutter *drives* the work, as original motivation, as lingering sonic, as auditory figure haunting the work—over the course of listening, we inadvertently listen for the work's fulfillment to eliminate its own stutter, anticipating its appearance and disappearance, its erasure, thereby always somehow finding it. In this way, how could the stutter ever truly disappear? It pulls us in, as a personal effect whispered to us, confessed in the desire or possibility of being eliminated. The stutter is the very heart of the work.

While Trevor Wishart's analysis of Lucier's work in his book *On Sonic Art*, though brief, describes it completely in terms of a "sound object" defining an abstracted relation to acoustic space, casting Lucier's approach as "literal and objective,"<sup>6</sup> it is my interest to unsettle such analysis by inserting the "psychological and subjective"—for speech unsettles the pure phenomenology of acoustical physics by always supplying or introducing the social and cultural tracings individuality intrinsically enacts, tracings that by nature are always partly ambiguous and forceful. Moving into a space of relations as inaugurated by acoustics, through following or enacting speech, opens out onto an existential uncertainty, for speech is not purely physical phenomena but a sticky medium for negotiating such phenomena. Thus, what must be recognized in Lucier's *I am sitting in a room* is a complicating of the physical phenomenon of acoustics as enacted by a voice staging its own existential release: not only do we hear a "sound object" but we hear an identity speaking his stutter into a form of acoustic space.

What appears in *I am sitting in a room* is forty-five minutes and thirty-two cycles of modulating repetition that ultimately turns orality into a spatial question.<sup>7</sup> Like Acconci, personal desire leads the artist to formulate for himself a different form of speech. Such speech is impelled by a certain relation to lack and haunted by the possibility of its erasure through self-fashioned performative exchanges. Lucier looks for the other and yet like Acconci this other is only himself divested of speech impediment, made complete through a sonic process that is more cosmetic than composition. Amelia Jones's observation that Acconci's work "proves his selfhood" by "making his environment mean in relation to himself" could, in turn, be applied to Lucier's *I am sitting in a room*. That the voice becomes the main acoustical driving force in this suggests, like Acconci, that architecture is intensely bound up with how and in what ways the individual may grapple with the difficulties of being in the world.

While Lucier unquestionably pursues physical and sonic phenomena, he does so in such a way as to *implicate* subjectivity. That is to say, Lucier's work, in its obsession with physical phenomena, winds its way inevitably toward a heightened consideration of individual presence. Such presence is not solely physical or phenomenal—for Lucier's work probes not only the conditions or characteristics of physical phenomena and their wonder, but also the conditions of subjectivity in the midst of grasping such wonder. In other works, such as *Music for a Solo Performer* (1965), *Vespers* (1968), *(Hartford) Memory Space* (1970), *Gentle Fired* (1971), and *Bird and Person Dying* (1975), not to mention *I am sitting in a room*, physical phenomena are made explicit only through the participation of people and the activating of perception. For instance, *(Hartford) Memory Space* asks participants to go outside and record sounds heard through audio recording, writing, or through memory alone, then to return inside to a given performance space and attempt to re-create the recorded sounds using voice and acoustic instruments only. Or *Vespers*, which asks that a group of any number of people equip themselves with hand-held echolocation devices and to explore a dimly lit space or environment and its inherent acoustics: reflection patterns, distances. And more, in *Music for a Solo Performer*, brainwaves are used to generate sonic results: attaching electrodes to his head (or other people's heads), a series of sounds is generated through alpha waves that activate acoustic instruments and other sounds. What these works, and many others, offer is the opportunity for anyone to experience, through a process that could be referred to as "musical," auditory events as immediate and ever-present. And further, to explore one's own presence as situated within various spaces or environments and their conditions: in this regard, the aural is used to investigate and discover how one occupies space and, in turn, how one is implicated within auditory space and events. While a work like *Music for a Solo Performer* results in what Lucier refers to as "music without compositional manipulation or purposeful performance,"<sup>8</sup> it does so by revealing the individual interior as full of unspoken intensities.





Alvin Lucier, *Music for a Solo Performer*

In approaching Lucier's work, we can recognize an obsession with the dynamics of subjective experience, in the form of listening and the activation of sound on the part of a performer and audience, as much as an obsession with physical phenomena. In this way, Lucier's work may point toward a bridging of the external world with states of awareness on the part of the listener or participant as an internal experience, and further, a staging of subjectivity and its position within the world. Such expanded terrain can be heard as an extension of Minimalist music, as in the works of La Monte Young, in so far as it develops a sonic palette distinct from traditional notions of musicality through investigating physical phenomena, as in the activation of spatial resonance. Yet, Lucier moves away and inserts, like Acconci, an addition to such legacy: that of subjective experience not so much marked by completion or plenitude as by contingency and relational uncertainty, either by relying on memory, the fevers of brainwaves, seeing in the dark, or the jagged inflections of a stutter.

### More and Less Voice

While stuttering is caused by various reasons, such as developmental (occurring as a child begins to acquire language and form the ability to utter words) or neurogenic (whereby signal problems occur between the brain and muscles), the psychogenic remains the least understood, occurring within the mind of the

individual, as a psychosomatic effect. Following the psychogenic, the stutter is heard as a secret attempting to emerge against the force of language, for it tries to say something that must not be said; the stutter brings into audibility that which must remain out of bounds. Speech is arrested, contained within the oral cavity, causing a glitch or skip in the flow of words, as a somatic spark, as a hiccup on the way to communication. We can hear the stutter as a literal noise in the social configuration of individuality—while the individual is called upon to answer properly, to speak up and find the words to participate as a whole body, the stutter breaks such certainty with hidden anxieties. It blemishes or impinges upon the linguistic necessity to deliver clear information; it steals back the body from the loop of conversation, to mark one as incomplete: words falling short, mouth getting tongue-tied, voice swallowing itself.

In *I am sitting in a room*, Lucier speaks his stutter, makes it the point of a composition and sonic process, conversing with himself, at home, so as to exorcise his own somatic quivers. Such performativity creates a platform from which music and stuttering coalesce and, in doing so, invade the other: music is made to stutter (as a kind of experimental extreme) and the stutter is given its own musicality through which the composer overcomes anxiety—he speaks the stutter to a point of composition, tonality, and spatial completion. The stutter in this case is a form of controlled feedback: it comes back to haunt Lucier, yet to a point of comfort and composition, where the composer may reside, take up home, within his own somatic tick, similar to Robert Ashley's work *The Wolfman*, from 1964, where voice unleashes a form of controlled and harmonic noise. Combining vocalization with audio feedback, as well as prepared audio tapes, *The Wolfman* creates a sonic journey in which electronic noise, as a total excess of timbral materiality, creates musical form: Ashley's vocalizations initiate waves of feedback that fill a space with itself, returning to the composer as a harsh duet. Ashley's *Wolfman* operates as doppelganger, an alter ego shadowing his own articulations, literally, a hybrid monster, part-human and part-animal. Such hybridity finds another form in *I am sitting in a room*: here, architectural space and individual body merge, creating other forms of being and speaking.

*I am sitting in a room* states a phenomenological fact: it points to an existential certainty, asserting physical presence as a condition of being. Such certainty finds its reinforcement through an uncanny removal of the actual body through audio recording. Recording and playback, while removing the body, reasserts the body, yet one remodeled through a corporeal fantasy. We can hear Lucier again and again, and with each playback and recording his voice diffuses, not to disappear but to reappear in the form of architecture: over time the original voice softens and gives way to the acoustical presence of the room. The voice here is consumed by space, and the room bloated with voice, "populated but also polluted, truly saturated with speech."<sup>9</sup> The room takes on character, as a partner in Lucier's strange duet. In providing an acoustical structure for tonality, the room, in turn, secures a private space allowing him to escape the sociality of speech, to outspoke himself.

Lucier's speech is not a solo, for it comes back, each instance transformed, masquerading as the original, until by the end we hear thirty-two voices as one: it is brought back, as "an expanded embodiment"<sup>10</sup> that wears a new face each time, for the voice loses and gains character with each cycle. In effect, stutter becomes music through a kind of recontextualization—from body to room, from single individual to hybrid multiple, it is thrown beyond and against architecture, and in the process, past the psychic ordering of language (interior) and into compositional possibility (exterior).

Lucier's performance washes out, fuses with, and overcomes the stutter by pushing it into smoothness, by making it architectural volume. For the "room is a complex filter, accentuating some bands of energy, damping others, and altering the phase (time shift) and the pitch (frequency shift) of any sound caught in its space."<sup>11</sup> Through a fusion with acoustics, *I am sitting in a room* proceeds to believing in the possibility of speech minus the stutter, and further, without body, as tonality attempting to transcend individual voice.

### Envelopes

To fuse the voice with surrounding space, in a harmonic plenitude, parallels what Didier Anzieu theorizes as the "sonorous envelope."<sup>12</sup> According to Anzieu, the sonorous envelope finds its first articulation in the mother's voice bathing the child in words of endearment and love. The maternal voice surrounds the child with an excess of gentle murmurs and whispers, words that cradle, like her embrace, the child. As Anzieu suggests, such sonorous plenitude comes to haunt the individual through life, and reappears in the voice of others, in the sounds of the environment, and, further, in musical experience. Music comes to function as an arena for reclaiming the sonorous envelope of childhood—to once again bathe in aural assurance.

The phenomenal momentum of Lucier's work, found not only in *I am sitting in a room* but throughout his career, in works such as *Vespers*, can be heard as bridging the divide between the individual and the phenomenal world, between an interior and exterior, between a looming perceptual haunted house and the ever-present environment. As Lucier professes, "[I] try to put people into harmonious relationships with them [natural phenomena]."<sup>13</sup> Musical composition for Lucier is a context for creating opportunities for integration. Yet *I am sitting in a room* remains bound to Lucier's person, as a means of seeking harmony, parallel to *Music for a Solo Performer*. Amplifying his own brainwaves, as source material for stimulating percussion instruments and other sounds, Lucier taps into hidden neurological activity as unconscious and secret events: synaptic spark equates with percussive attack, unconscious phantom triggers fragmented rhythm. The performance literally monitors and draws out such buried secrets. What we hear, then, is Lucier's psyche as musician, replacing the physical body of the drummer with that of brain activity. As in *I am sitting in a room*, *Music for Solo Performer*



exteriorizes internal mysteries, making them physically present—a drum solo by a motionless, meditating player.

Lucier's sonorous envelope, in which the composer wraps himself in an acoustical plenitude through which his stuttering voice returns to him without creases, as a narcissistic completion, finds its parallel in Acconci's masturbatory fantasy vocalized and amplified in the gallery as a monologue to the visitor. Acconci, in his solitary confinement, fantasizes possible escape—escape into another, into the production of seed, into the ramp, which acts as an architectural envelope wrapping him in darkness. Yet, while Acconci performs discord, Lucier creates harmony; Lucier integrates, through a phenomenological belief in pure speech, while Acconci breaks apart, through a performative speech that aims for the messiness of desire and the eventual collapse of his proposed integration. Both enact personal projects in which completion is totally fantasized.

The ramp in *Seedbed* is a kind of house for Acconci; it's an interior that amplifies, through hiding, the interior of his own fantasies. Speech, in being an "intensification of an interior"<sup>14</sup> vibrates beyond the body to "involve" those who hear the voice within their interior. Acconci, as nothing but voice, is nothing but interior fantasy—he is nothing but vocal presence and masturbatory vibration that paradoxically reflects his "yearning to cohere himself" by staging a relation to others. "In this way . . . he proves he is the 'self' . . . but also proves his dependence on this other."<sup>15</sup> Lucier's voice, in contrast, is resonance reinforcing itself; it is interior conducted through generations of audio recording and amplified playback, compounded by architecture, and made object. Yet Lucier's listener, like Acconci's, is an imagined other: private activity aims for a relation to another, as projected through an architectural envelope similar to Acconci's ramp. Here, the room allows the voice to become something else, to achieve the potential of smooth speech, signaling an overcoming of the lack registered in the stutter, for the stutter refers to a hidden problematic. In finally arriving, at the end of the recording, at such smoothness, at architecture, the listener is brought closer to a tonal plenitude in which noise, as heard in the stutter, disappears, awash in the flow of a phenomenal event.

What I've been pursuing here, through Acconci and Lucier's work, is a perspective on space in which relational exchanges come to draw into relief the intrinsic social and psychic performances to which architecture is always already complicit. Following their work, architectural space functions as both generator and conductor of social exchange, an amplifier and transformer of the voice, and a field for the negotiation of longing, fulfilled or not. Lucier's *sitting in the room* slides into *sitting in his own speech*. Through such an act, Lucier infiltrates Young's Dream House, making it a haunted house, whereby phenomenological fact becomes psychological unease; psychoacoustical listening, a sonorous envelope pricked with desire. The liberated sound of Cage, and the phenomenal aesthetic of Minimalism, is on the surface of Lucier, yet what's underneath is "the intersection of one man's voice with his immediate environment" in which "those

whistling tones are neither just any or all of the resonances, but only those that are shared by both the voice and the room."<sup>16</sup>

If Lucier builds architecture, it is an architecture imbued with the problematic of having a body. In turn, architecture allows an escape from such a body, by stripping him of that nagging stutter and refashioning personality outside the identifying jag of his speech. What Lucier and Acconci's work brings forward are the embedded tensions inherent to architecture. That speech, and the performing vocality of a situated body, lends to such investigation must, in turn, fall back upon how we hear speech, not only as found in an aesthetic object.

## Notes

1. For more information on the acousmatic, see Trevor Wishart, *On Sonic Art* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998).
2. David Behrman, quoted in Christopher Cox, "The Jerrybuilt Future," in *Undercurrents: The Hidden Wiring of Modern Music*, ed. Rob Young (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 40.
3. James Tenney, "The Eloquent Voice of Nature," in Alvin Lucier, *Reflections: Interviews, Scores, Writings* (Cologne: MusikTexte, 1995), p. 12.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 12–14.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 322.
6. Trevor Wishart, *On Sonic Art*, pp. 158–159.
7. The version I am referring to here was made in 1980, at the artist's home in Middletown, Connecticut, and has been released as a CD on Lovely Music ([New York], 1990).
8. Alvin Lucier, *Reflections: Interviews, Scores, Writings*, p. 432.
9. Christof Migone, "Volume (of Confinement and Infinity): A History of Unsound Art," in *S:On: Sound in Contemporary Canadian Art* (Montreal: Éditions Arttextes, 2003), p. 81.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Aden Evens, *Sound Ideas: Music, Machines, and Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 54.
12. See Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, trans. Chris Turner (London and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).
13. Alvin Lucier, *Reflections: Interviews, Scores, Writings*, p. 196.
14. Walter J. Ong, "A Dialectic of Aural and Objective Correlatives," in *The Barbarian Within, and Other Fugitive Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 32.
15. Amelia Jones, "The Body in Action: Vito Acconci and the 'Coherent' Male Artistic Subject," in *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 137.
16. Nicolas Collins, liner notes to Alvin Lucier, *I am sitting in a room* (Audio CD) (New York: Lovely Music, 1990).