The Sounds of Forgetting: An Aural Exploration of Memory and Perception
AN ARTIST’S STATEMENT

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THE SOUNDS OF FORGETTING IS A SONIC EXPLORATION OF A FAILING MEMORY. My intention was to create a soundscape of a mind suffering from dementia in which the listener is immersed in a disorienting chaos of memories, thoughts, and experiences. My raw materials were two recordings of jazz standards, approximately four hours of my recorded conversations with my father, Dr. John Moorhouse, from October 2009 and December 2010, and two tapes of dictations from his medical practice. One of the tapes was the last recording of his career, in which he states that he is “retiring from patient care.” It was recorded in 2005, when my father was seventy-nine, soon after he began showing signs of dementia. His has been a very slow decline, but the sharpest drop occurred directly following his retirement. My goal was to create a simulation of his mind while creating a through-line that would represent a movement from a life guided by intellect to one guided by perception. I attempted to achieve this by experimenting with an array of acoustic techniques, by exploring intimacy, immersion, and disorientation, and by applying concepts of phenomenology and perception. I was greatly inspired by the work of Janet Cardiff, as can be seen from many of the concepts and techniques that I used.
THE SOUNDSCAPE

I originally set out to create a sound version of a “memory theater” based on concepts in The Art of Memory by Frances A. Yates, and particularly on her exploration of Giulio Camillo’s Memory Theatre. Camillo’s theater was predicated on an ancient process of remembering in which one memorizes a speech, for example, by “placing” images associated with the words of the speech in a “building” in one’s imagination. Then, when these words need to be remembered, one takes an imaginary walk through the building, and each image and consequently its associated word are recalled in sequence. In the sixteenth century, Camillo actually created a physical structure based on this ancient method of remembering—his memory theater—which told the story of human history through images of human artistic, religious, and scientific activity.¹

I wanted to create a soundscape–memory theater of my father’s cherished memories highlighted by sound images associated with each memory. This would have provided the listener with an aural tour of his mind. However, as I soon discovered, these memories were not available to him on the days of our interviews, and what I got instead was a recording of my father’s current experience of the world, with very little reference to the past. I was struck by his readiness to “live for the moment” and to, for the most part, fatalistically accept the loss of his memory. I made the decision to explore his new phenomenological way of living.

The resulting soundscape is dominated by random and fragmented dictations and conversations because this is my interpretation of how my father’s mind works—but, really, it is how most minds work. As Cathy Lane and Nye Parry state in their description of Janet Cardiff’s The Memory Machine installation at the British Museum in 2007, "Rather than taking a narrative paradigm as a storyteller might, The Memory Machine applies musical processes to the materials it gathers. Sounds are fragmented and echoed, repeated and varied, juxtaposed with both similar and unrelated fragments. This way of looking at structure offers a useful analogy to the processes of memory, in which networks of meaning interact and complex connections between ideas link seemingly disparate elements.”² Cardiff explores this randomness of the mind in her installation piece The Dark Pool, which she describes as “a metaphor for the mind and how it works in a hypertextual way. The mind is a dark pool of forgotten, illogical facts and images as much as it is a logical reasoning entity.”³ I experimented with this idea, and then in order to explore a mind suffering from dementia I further increased the disorder. Conversations with my father are marked by repetition, fragmentation, and randomness, and I employed these techniques to explore the inner processes of his mind and their outer representations.

I was influenced by Marshall McLuhan’s Understanding Media: Extensions of Man and by the concept of a technological medium being an extension of a human being, which he explores in the chapter “The Medium Is the Message.”⁴ I chose to literalize this concept by using my father’s Dictaphone as the recording device for most of our interviews. He had used it for years, and while growing up I would hear him dictating letters for his typist each evening in his office. I used this device not only as a physical extension of him but also as a way to connect his past self with his present self. Janet Cardiff uses this same concept in her Villa Medici Walk, where a man’s

voice can be heard through a Dictaphone, and the device and the sound of his voice through that medium represent someone she has lost. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev notes that at the end of this piece, the lost man seems to emerge from the Dictaphone, as though he had literally been inside it.\textsuperscript{5} Perhaps I too am looking for someone who is lost.

My piece is, to use Damiano Pietropaolo’s words, “a digital manipulation of reality into art.”\textsuperscript{6} All the sounds other than the two jazz recordings are natural and unscripted but were technologically manipulated in postproduction to create a structure of my own design. My intention was to create intimacy by making the listener a participant in the piece and by going so far as to place the listener in the acoustic space of my father’s mind. I wanted to create a sense of confusion, unease, and disorientation in order to create an acoustic experience that might mimic my father’s experience. As a result of the transparency of the medium, for the first few moments the listener might be led to believe that the piece is an oral medical document. To create a disorienting effect, I borrowed from Janet Cardiff, whose \textit{Munster Walk} begins as a museum tour and turns into one of her immersive sound walks, the technique of setting a piece up to be something other than what it is. My hope was that the listener might feel deceived or misguided, which would mimic the mistrust that I imagine my father feels toward his mind.

\section*{FROM INTELLECT TO PERCEPTION}

I was exploring the idea that my father has been forced from a life guided by scientific investigation to one guided by perception, or from one guided by the intellect to one guided by the body. I used Merleau-Ponty’s \textit{The World of Perception} as inspiration to explore this shift.\textsuperscript{7} In the first lecture of this book, Merleau-Ponty debates the value of science versus the value of perception. My piece begins with medical dictations, which soon become incomprehensible. Pieces of other dictations are layered on, resulting in a random and simultaneous collection of now-meaningless scientific words and numbers. This is reminiscent of the Artaudian concept of dissociation of meaning from language.\textsuperscript{8} The dissociation in my piece is enhanced because I changed the function of the dictations by manipulating them into art. They have lost the medical context, and in this new context most listeners will not have the medical background to derive meaning from the language. These words were once the key to somebody’s health and physical makeup, but through the passage of time and the change of context and function, the words have lost their meaning. I used this dichotomy between medical precision and complete incomprehensibility to symbolize the breakdown of my father’s mind.

Although initially intended to mimic the ringing in my father’s ears and to create confusion for the listener, the high-pitched drone throughout the piece took on another function. R. Murray Schafer states that “the function of the drone has long been known in music. It is an anti-intellectual narcotic. It is also a point of focus for meditation, particularly in the East.” Schafer is commenting on the “loss of richness of experience” as a result of the Industrial Revolution.\textsuperscript{9} I was not commenting on richness of experience but used the drone as a tool to quiet the listener’s

\begin{footnotes}
\item[6] Damiano Pietropaolo, “Dramaturgy of Sound” (lecture, University of Toronto, September 9, 2009).
\item[8] Brendon Allen, “Artaud” (lecture, University of Toronto, October 14, 2009).
\end{footnotes}
listener’s mind and force him or her to explore the “anti-intellectual”—and the meditative possibilities that may exist there.

The listener is then left with fragmented conversations in which my father reflects on his current—perceptual—experiences. At one point he calls out, “Live for the moment!” implying a reliance on immediate perception. Amid the chaos I wanted to allow for moments of reflection where the listener could have a chance to emotionally engage with the subject matter. I did this near the middle of the piece by simplifying it to just one or two tracks of peaceful conversation between my father and me and by removing distortion techniques. The listener has a chance to become an observer rather than an active participant. The confusion builds intermittently from here, with moments of confusion interspersed with otherwise-linear conversations with my father.

In the final section, my father begins to sing two songs that we sang together when I was growing up. He has never forgotten the words or the tunes of songs he knew in his youth, and if I play a pop song from the 1950s or 1960s, he often has a very visceral reaction to the music, at times appearing to be almost transported. When asked what he remembers when hearing one of these songs, he says that he feels emotions from the past but cannot recall a particular time or place. Gaston Bachelard writes about art speaking to the soul and not to the mind. And Leonard B. Meyer asserts, “Unlike a closed, non-referential mathematical system, music is said to communicate emotional and aesthetic meanings as well as purely intellectual ones.” The music here speaks to my father’s emotions and to his body but not to his intellect.

At the end of my piece, the singing stops, and one of the final sounds is clapping hands. This represents the final shift to the primacy of the body. In his introduction to The World of Perception, Thomas Baldwin quotes Merleau-Ponty’s The Phenomenology of Perception. He states that “by . . . remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall rediscover ourself, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception.” I partly attribute my father’s quick decline following retirement to a loss of personal identity, and I was exploring the idea that his current contentment may be a result of a recent “rediscovery” of himself through the world of perception. The contact with the world through perception creates, according to Merleau-Ponty, “an experience of a world of things in space and time whose nature is independent of us. It is our ‘bodily’ intentionality which brings the possibility of meaning into our experience by ensuring that its content, the things presented in experience, are surrounded with references to the past and future, to other places and other things, to human possibilities and situations.” The availability of the “past and future” is limited, but my father can receive references to them from the stories of those around him, as he does in the middle section of my piece, and he can become connected to other people through universal actions such as hand clapping, as he does at the end. He becomes an active part of the world around him and not just a passive observer.

Through the use of disorientation and immersion and by exploring concepts of the intellect versus perception, I have created a piece that is an exploration of my father’s immediate experience of the world. Scientifically, I do not entirely comprehend what is happening to him—and emotionally it is often very difficult. With this piece I have not attempted to explain or glorify what can happen to a person suffering from any form of dementia. I am simply attempting to be-

12 Merleau-Ponty, World of Perception, 9.
13 Ibid.
gin understanding and celebrating my father in a way that makes sense to me now, an endeavor that I find comforting. Merleau-Ponty says that we should try to understand differing forms of perception, and that "it is in this spirit that modern art and philosophy have come to reexamine . . . those forms of existence which are the most distant from our own."14 Through my exploration I have attempted to do just that. 

14 Ibid., 57.