

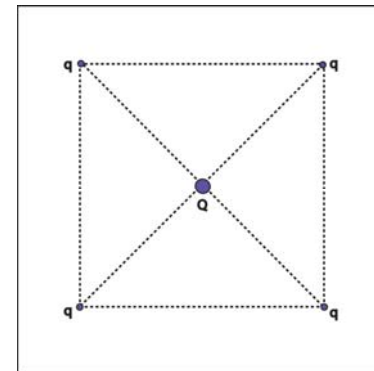
A Room without Walls: Experimental Music and Queer Space

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There is a room without walls. This room queers all that enters. When we are in this room we feel welcomed and visible; clear in form but not pre-determined in function. We desire this room. We want to lay on its floor. Together we press arm to arm, the delicate skin on the back of our fingers lightly touching the bodies to our left and to our right. When we hear, it is a sound emanating from our own chest. It is the sound of being called to and calling out. When we listen we are both speaking and being spoken to. The room listens. The room adapts to hold contour, to hold curves and lines, to hold what we forget to acknowledge, the jagged excess or sagging mildewing floors. It holds all of it, especially the junk. It likes it when junk piles up, spills upon each other, creates sticky seams between forms; large, loud, mutated chunks start to become undefinable. This junk changes the listenings. This room is nowhere and everywhere simultaneously. Sometimes it is carried within a body, or between two bodies or more. Sometimes it appears momentarily and then is gone. Sometimes we think we are making this room, but then thoughts form cement. Cement forms bricks. Bricks form walls, and suddenly we are separated from ourselves and from this room. We rebuild this room, dismantle it, and take it with us. It is a life's work. The room is hidden and only found by listening.



Experimental Music exists in queer space. This space, which appears from a froth of interweaving and complex social, political, and artistic desires throughout time, has been codified through the writings of queer theorists, people, and practices. According to theorist J. Jack Halberstam in *In a Queer Time & Place*, “Queer space refers to the placemaking practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and also describe new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics” (p.6). Queer theory, as a direct descendant of feminism, describes in precise and clear terms the structuring of a potential, alternate, and insistent world buzzing below the surface of the known heteronormative monolith. This monolith, a sheet of thick fabric, or the endless expanse of the dark sky, is punctured by tiny tears and pullings through which light spills. These inevitable luminescences are the openings of queer space, creating rooms in which time bends and are given new forms.

The philosophical parameters of queer openings, or “rooms” are the exact environments necessary for cultivating new and radical strategies for creating and/or experiencing experimental music. While the experimental music world (like almost all music worlds) has become dominated by straight, white, men, the founding principles of these modes of inquiry and experimentation are decisively queer. This space was founded by philosophical and artistic pursuits of queer people—specifically for my purposes, I am looking at John Cage and Pauline Oliveros—and continues to assert itself in different contemporary forms. Through these openings we can see quite clearly queer methods of resistance specifically in response to normative notions of failure/success, hierarchical structuring, standard notions of time, the import of virtuosity, and the marginalizations of the dynamic potentials of listening.

While these alternative modes of creative inquiry are a radical shift from the values of dominant culture, they often assume a ‘neutral subjectivity’ that does not allow for discourse around race, class, religion, sex, age, sexuality, gender identification, or physical ability. The truth of our world is that there is no ‘neutral subject’ power is distributed unequally and with high levels of violent discrimination. Simultaneous to this truth is our equally potent desire for change, for a queerness of the future. Our diverse “rooms” are both literal and physical representations of queer space that also reflect the power of our specific subjectivities in defining when and how queer space appears. It is my hope that these artistic strategies will attract more women, people of color, trans people, gender nonconforming people, and queers of all shapes and stripes. If not, the vitality and radical potential of experimental music will become increasingly homogenous and ultimately irrelevant as a critical contemporary art practice.

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity. Both the ornamental and the quotidian can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness. Turning to the aesthetic in the case of queerness is nothing like an escape from the social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations. Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.

-Jose Esteban Munoz, *Cruising Utopia*

Sometimes this room is a bedroom. Brightly painted indigo on our eighth birthday by our Uncle Plato who is Greek and a baker and our favorite. Accompanying his brush strokes are his lilting whistles mapping out old Greek melodies or the deep boom of his voice leaking to us in our carpeted living/dining room below. His voice hits the wall in our small bedroom. The voice reflects, about sixty times in one second, hitting thousands of points on the wall. These reflections bounce behind him, crashing into things; a mirror, a Rainbow Brite doll, books, a dresser, a corner filled with candles, an acoustic guitar, and clothes. A thick layer of absorbent mess fills the room, fills the house. (Hoarders we would come to understand.) His reflections hit other walls, other hard surfaces, and reflect back; the sound filling the room instantly.

After he died we looked at the wall. At the time we thought it was just purple, but as we aged we refined our tastes with nuanced differentiation; indigo. This indigo was only allowed on one wall but included the wall around the door frame. Our small bed is pressed upon it, hiding half of its brilliance. We find glowinthedark stars that we stick on our ceiling and on our wall. We write secret messages to our future self. We paint umbrellas and flowers and boots. We put up a poster of Ani DiFranco.

Our parents tell us that the previous owners of the house had every wall painted with images of American pride circa 1970's kitch. The walls used to be lined with thick wall paper saturated with a miniature, though erect, George Washington and his revolutionaries crossing the Delaware. In the scene, Washington is surrounded by a diverse array of soldiers, their race and genders becoming more indeterminate in their duplication. The rush of the water and shouts of the men are deafened by a layer of paint. All that is left of the patriotism is a lampshade hanging in the middle of the room. Hand made, the shade is glass, with four sides and a pinnacle opening from the ceiling like a bell. The outside is painted like an American flag with the top of the shade blue with white stars and the sides striped with red and white. We deface this shade with stars of our own, and a sticker that says "TOO MUCH". When it is dark, we close the doors, pick up our acoustic guitar, and gaze at the miracle of these glowing plastic stickers. The guitar is too big for our small hands, but we are strong so we make sound, first buzzes and slips, then clear tones, all the while our fingertips hardening and conforming. We hear the TV from downstairs through the carpet, through the floor. Nightly news with sssssps, and zzzzzzps, and 'did you know', and datatadaaaa.



The imposing structures of Western Classical Music, perhaps more clearly than other artistic discourse, is based on following an inherited set of rules, regulations and codes. One of the first openings of queer spaces in experimental music, John Cage's 4'33", triggered a series of bursting orbs paralleling the path of the queer, albeit sublimated maverick. In Michael Nyman's book, *Experimental Music: John Cage and Beyond*, published in 1974, Nyman states that John Cage's 1952 composition 4'33" was the *first piece of experimental music*, and "distinguishes it from fully structured and notated contemporaneous compositions, which he names 'avantgarde'" (p.66). Cage's disinterest in contemporary notions of the score—finished and fully formed compositional objects—in favor of the unknown leads to the irrelevance of notions of *failure* or *success*. 'Experimental' becomes an acceptance of failure, a welcoming room in which any outcome is potentially equally favorable. In relation to the larger music world, this acceptance was highly uncomfortable, as it dislodged notions of composer control and larger structural western musical paradigms. With 4'33" there was no content that could be easily analyzed or critiqued, and focused more on the experience of the listener and the myriad of possible clamouring 'silences'. According to J. Jack Halberstam, in the *The Queer Art of Failure*:

Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon "trying and trying again."

The 'philosophical impulse towards failure' that Halberstam delineates is one that is in direct opposition to a world that values certain types of beings, a modus operandi that believes in a binary structuring code of good/bad, music/hotmusic, self/other, man/woman repeating ad nauseum. This structuring, which can lead to a certain standardization and critique of human experience, is a framework that 4'33" was most clearly trying to disturb.

Cage's 'silences', most specifically with 4'33", are imbued with radical action that was clearly created for, by, and containing of, queer space. In Jonathan Katz's fascinating essay, *John Cage's Queer Silence*, Katz argues that Cage's silence regarding his sexuality was not closeted, hidden, or shameful, but rather part of a larger philosophical framing that valued a reorganization of human perception. "For if his silence was an attempt to escape notice—as the silence of the closet presumably is—it was a manifest failure. Cage

became notable precisely for his silences—clear proof of the unsuitability of silence as a strategy for evasion” (Katz, p.50). Like the strategies of nonviolent resistance utilized in the 1960’s civil rights movement, or the sit-ins whirling around him, Cage’s acts of silences were political. Rather than ‘nonactions’ or a disinterest in the social structuring of the world, Cage believed that by opening up space for silence a new position can appear. This queer space, this silence space, was filled with a belief in the power of reformulating the potential of music to include an act of listening that is broader than what was previously conceived as meaningful. Rather than relying on the normative structuring of space—specifically the music hall in which music fills and is passively received—Cage is attempting to call attention to these structural assumptions and thus activating the listener as cocreator to the experience.

Sometimes this room is a street. We push forward towards the podium. Drum sticks in our damp hands. The June sun beats down on us and reflects upon the midtown air. It took us two tries going to vintage and thrift stores all over Brooklyn to find the perfect outfit. Here we are in pink and black; pink fishnet stockings under black jean shorts, black tuxedo shirt cut at the sleeves, black suspenders, blonde mohawk dyed pink sticking up with Elmer’s glue, pink lipstick smattered with glitter, blue eye liner and thick black combat boots. Our pale white skin poking out from the holes in the fish nets. Legs shaved clean for today. The crowd swells around us. The bear to our right is holding a sign that says, SUPPORT OUR COMMUNITY, BOYCOTT HRC. We look up to the front of our pink and black cluster, see Ben holding up his hand, raising the red whistle to the sun. We tug at the rope holding up our snare drum trying to synch the rope at the knot around our waist. 1, 2, 1, 2, 3. We start the beat, Jackie to our left has the bass drum. She plays, boom clack boom boom, and we come in tattat tattat. The crowd around us jumps with excitement. NO PEACE, NO JUSTICE! NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE! Signs are waved in time to the march. People yell louder, the middleaged woman at the podium uses the megaphone to egg us on. Then she says, HOW CAN THEY SAY THAT THEY STAND FOR US WHEN THEY WON’T PROTECT THOSE OF US MOST AT RISK AT BEING DISCRIMINATED AGAINST? Our drumming stops, our faces turn towards the woman. She is framed between two willow trees arching their way towards her from the back of the park. Her face is far away but her words hit us with clarity. She says, IT IS ALL OF US GOING FORWARD OR NONE OF US! WE WILL NOT LET THE HETERONORMATIVE INTERESTS OF HRC DEFINE OUR MOVEMENT! THEY DO NOT SPEAK FOR US! The crowd responds with screams and clapping. We beat our drums as loud as we can creating a ten second wall of sounds. She says, NOW, JOIN WITH ME FOR A MINUTE OF SILENCE AS WE REMEMBER OUR COMMUNITY MEMBERS

WHO HAVE BEEN KILLED, ABUSED, OR DISCRIMINATED AGAINST DUE TO THEIR GENDER EXPRESSION. We put our drum sticks down upon the drum skin and turn our heads towards the people around us; the tension in their bodies release, their eyes clear or close, and we look to the ground. We hear the whirring of cars circling around the park, the siren of a distant horn, the birds on the trees above us. We hear a baby cry in the crowd and our shoes shuffling against the concrete. We hear our breaths and our hearts beating in our ears.



The tendency is to seek out more comfortable situations and activities. But I have never been satisfied in my work if I find I am becoming more comfortable with it.
-Pauline Oliveros interviewed by Robert Ashley, 1976.

For the video series, *Music with Roots in the Aether*, Robert Ashley interviewed the experimental composer Pauline Oliveros in 1976 at the Student Union at Mills College. During the interview Oliveros’ clear appearance of queer, butch, female masculinity is transformed into femme drag by friend and actor Carol Vencius, while her lover, performance artist Linda Montano, lies inside of a piano draped in roses, cloth and rope. This drag performance, *Unnatural Acts Between Consenting Adults*, is the idiosyncratic and wonderful counterpoint to the revealing interview in which Oliveros discusses, and performs, the complexities of her artistic work. These complexities can be understood as located both within the tenuous enunciation of Oliveros’ queer body and within her compositional strategies.

Indeed, the rub of these tensions are central to Oliveros numerous ventures, and ultimate creation of queer spaces. As Oliveros goes on to describe:

There are two things for me. One is the move into this meditative sort of work and the idea of changing my own consciousness as I work. The other was the theatrical development where I began to work with materials other than just sound, it was a kind of way of disorientation of roles: disorientation of the audience's role with the music [and] a drawing attention away from simply sounding, a drawing of attention into the situation and the boundaries of the situation.

- Pauline Oliveros interviewed by Robert Ashley, 1976.

In this we see that Oliveros, having a nonconforming gender identity and transgressive sexual desires, is contending with a world that is literally *disorienting* her, and therefore seeks to mirror this disorientation to the audience and allow for a collective queer dislodging from what she describes as the *situation*. What Oliveros is rejecting is not only heteronormative fracturing but also the ease in which people are subjugated to categorical delineations and divisions.

A queer pioneer before her time, Oliveros also repelled labels put on her from the LGBT community. In an interview that she did with writer Martha Mockus in 1996, Oliveros says, "I guess I've spent a lot of my life jumping out of people's bags that they've tried to put me in. I've even contemplated getting out of the composer bag. Like, wait a minutewhat is a composer? What does it *mean* to say you're a lesbian? Because these things are so neat, these labels—...They don't mean a thing—I mean, it doesn't deal with the issues of one's life." (p.132). This particular position, a queer duality in which one is constantly maneuvering, analyzing, and responding to one's own tenuous positioning is central to understandings of *disorientation* and the numerous strategies one must employ to become visible. According to J. Jack Halberstam in her book *Female Masculinity*, "Few popular renditions of female masculinity understands the masculine woman as a historical fixture, a character who has challenged gender systems for at least two centuries" (p.45). For Oliveros these social challenges take the form of her compositional practice:

And within myself, there's the environmental pull—you mentioned struggle—the kind of feelings about myself, say the way I want to be, as opposed to the way the social environment intends for me to be. That kind of pulling. I think that has been a sort of overwhelming force, and trying to keep myself centered, to meet that. I think it is

represented in the improvisations that I have been talking about.
-Pauline Oliveros interviewed by Robert Ashley, 1976.

Sometimes this room is a living room. We lean against the white walls, with crisp white suits, white shirts and black ties, our skin dark against the walls, against our suits. We feel the bass shaking our backs and legs, loosening our muscles and skin as we sweat, sensing our strangeness in the crowd. We sip our drinks, gin in clear plastic cups, and look up. We seem relaxed and in control, a butch clarity scanning the room, watching, and being watched. Knowing that we are outsiders, we look at the women with hesitation, or at least more hesitation than we would if we were in our neighborhood. This is a friend's home, Ashley, and she is showing us that she is rich, white, and generous. She mixes expensive liquors and hands out noise makers painted bright colors' reds and greens, with metal tops and streamers. We get the metal one that you spin. The TV comes on at the end of the room and we all see the ball, bright with a hundred lights, bracing itself before the crowd in Times Square. Someone turns down the music, and turns up the volume of the TV. People are jammed together, jumping up and down, screaming. We watch, and the countdown begins. We join in yelling loudly, TEN, NINE, EIGHT....HAPPY NEW YEARS! We spin our noisemaker and yell, woooooo-hooooo, the metal balls smack against their casing, the kazoos are voiced: sound spraying throughout the room in a torrential burst of excitement. We turn and kiss, and turn and kiss, and turn and kiss as the waltzing melody of Auld Lang Syne starts up. Should auld acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind? Should auld acquaintance be forgot and auld lang syne? Our damp bodies are washed with others sweat, our voices and bodies merged. The moment passes and we go outside.



J. Jack Halberstam in their book, *In a Queer Time and Place*, enumerates the multiple ways that a cultural, personal, social, and political notion of time can be displaced by artistic practice. Halberstam states, "One of my central assertions has been that queer temporarily disrupts the normative narratives of time that form the base of nearly every definition of the human in almost all of our modes of understanding, from the professions of psychoanalysis and medicine, to socioeconomic and demographic studies on which every sort of state policy is based, to our understandings of the affective and the aesthetic (p.152)". This contextualization asserts that our notions of progress— personally, socially, politically or otherwise—are tied specifically into our perception of time. The human delineations of linear time is one of the most basic assertions of control over a chaotic, and unruly universe. Our desires to organize that which seems beyond our control, is seen with extremely clarity in the development of our numberbased time systems, and specifically within western music the fetishization and imperial nature of the score.

Controlled improvisation is the basis of a philosophical paradigm through which Oliveros has explored the transformative power of listening for herself, other musicians, and with her larger audience. In 1970 Oliveros started her series of *Sonic Meditations* which would later become crucial to the development of her teaching practice, *Deep Listening*. During this time, she was also developing compositions that mimicked or developed social structuring as the container through which improvisation would appear. For her, improvisation was significant in that it allowed a closer examination of the material being presented and, through the body, created an integration of the self into a larger system of meaning and sound. As she says to Mockus:

...listening is what one can cultivate and practice over a whole lifetime. Listening is learned, it isn't a natural thing. It's something that you can deepen with practice and with receptivity. So it is important for me because it is a tool for growth and change and spirituality. Cultivating it and learning to extract the last possible drop of meaning from sound is very important for me. (p.165)

This type of listening has potential radical personal and therefore social implications which Oliveros has explored in varying ways. For in many of Oliveros' pieces the emphasis, when improvisation occurs, is to be completely receptive and present in the current moment and to thus create an openness that privileges listening before sounding.

A piece that aptly articulates this position is *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of Their Desperation* (1970). This piece is ideal because it combines a clear radical reconsideration of social positioning with

specific modalities for compositional structuring. For *Oliveros*, the title of the piece was a recognition of these two women, who although having very different lives and situations, were both artists who were stifled or struggling with their artistic expression. This contribution to the highly active feminist movement in which she was a part of is best articulated through her own response to, and interpretation of Solanas's radical S.C.U.M. Manifesto, and the resulting structuring of *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of Their Desperation*:

Well Valerie Solanas was a street kid, a street feminist. The structure of community was detailed in that manifesto. It was soon after reading that when I wrote To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of their Desperation—. What I articulated out of SCUM Manifesto was the deep structure of the piece: everybody had the same part. There were rules about how to be part of that musical community in the piece so that each person could express themselves individually within the limitations of the material they had which they selected for themselves, in terms of the pitches, and the way they used the pitches within the three parts of the piece. If anyone became dominant, then the rest of the group would come up and absorb that dominance back into the texture of the piece. So that was me expressing at the deep structure what the SCUM Manifesto meant. From there, you know, I went on to do Sonic Meditations and many other pieces, but it was really out of that understanding of both community and the individual—which was in her manifesto—that became the principle, or the philosophy, of the music that I began to write. That's why I say it was very important. She had something to say, and she said it forcefully, of course. (p.155)

To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of Their Desperation was performed recently by a 14-piece ensemble as part of the festival 'Her Noise: Feminisms and the Sonic' organised by CRiSAP, Electra and Tate Modern. The simple set up—performers in a semicircle partially surrounding the audience—coupled with the precise saturated use of color situates both the audience and performers in a dense world. This world, starting in red and slowly moving from yellow then into blue, has its own internal set of logic and emergent systems. While Oliveros score created the space, the dynamics between the players determined the performance. This 'staging', or an opening of an alternative, nonhierarchical, queer, space is diametrically opposed to traditional understandings of notes on a staff written and played from left to right, following a set of codes and systems based on a linear temporality. Rather, *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of Their Desperation*, creates emergent space that seems to exist vertically as well as horizontally through time. In the middle, yellow, section players are

listening and responding, collectively moving towards and away from ideas and articulations. This miasma, or growing of a collective is quite larger, fuller, and wilder than any of the players individual comprehension or control. There is no dominant sound or performer, but rather a collection of parts moving and swaying together, in and out of time.

Sometimes this room is a church made into an art space. We lay on the wood floor and look up into the second story rafters. The church is painted white all along the perimeter. We think, Is this still a church? Even now? The sunlight streams in along the top windows as we hear the audience enter all around us. We feel their footsteps on the wooden floor resonate through our back. We sense them circling around the outside of the floor, afraid to come into the center. Is this for us? Someone walks towards us and we stir, clack clack clack. More sounds, more people. They move towards other couples placed along the floor. We tug on our partner's foot, gently, imperceptibly, and they stir slowly tracing our body with the back side of their hand. Our eyes move first, towards our partner's shoulder, then our legs, our hands pushing down against the wooden floor we move upwards. There is a speaker and microphone hanging above us. We stumble together, like two animals playing, pawing at each other. We sing and groan. Holding each other we mouth our words into our partners tshirt. We breath in her sweat as we sing the phrase given to us. We sing into their arm and stomach and hear our own voice emanating from a speaker to our right and behind. We hear other bodies wrestling above us and through us. We continue to push and pull back down towards the floor as someone comes by and moves the dividing panel that shields us from the other pairs. Breaking off, we walk towards the back left corner of the room and find the boy with a small tight afro and a heather grey tank top. He picks up his trumpet and is playing towards us, into us as we walk towards us. We lift up our shirt and our brown belly is touched by the cold gold metal of his bell. We let it rest there, the breath pushing upon our skin. No sound will come. We take the horn bell and move it upwards towards the microphone. We hear the sound of the long tone. Ten seconds later we hear it diagonal from us. The audience moves around us, walking, in between dividers and bodies and cords. We continue to move together, then away towards some other place, some other body. The sounds build in the speakers, a cacophonous displacement ending in a crescendo of ragged swells.



There is a room without walls. This room queers all that enters. When we are in this room we feel welcomed and visible; clear in form but not pre-determined in function. Like the acclaimed queer theorist Jose Esteban Munoz says, "Utopia is not prescriptive; it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema. It is productive to think of utopia as flux, a temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a then and a there that could be and indeed should be" (p.99). By planting seeds and strategies for a different world, experimental music offers glimpses at something perpetually new, always changing, and endlessly challenging. It is this energy that is inherently queer and ripe with possibility.

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