

Jerome Noetinger interview with Werner Däfeldecker and Valerio Tricoli (excerpt). Originally published on Revue and Corrigë #90, December 2011.

Is this new version a commission ?

Not at first. We had the idea for a new version of WM in 2009 and we started our investigations on the piece in early 2010. That led us to our friend Volker Straebel who works at the sound-department of the Technical University in Berlin and is a Cage expert. With him we worked on the idea to eventually realize a new tape version of Williams Mix, but that project failed because it was impossible to get funding for such an introverted plan. We then decided to make a digital version, which could have been made with less fundings, and eventually started the project. During that process we approached curators and received our commission quasi in retrospect.

How have you found the means to render the cutting angles and other precise indications pertinent to tape, on computer ?

More than a direct "rendering" what we did could be described as a "translation", and sometimes an integration. The score asks for different cutting angles for each tape fragment that compose the piece, and these angles could be ascending or descending, and sometimes are obtained with a double cut. On tape, the sonic result of a wider cutting angle is a longer fade-in (or fade-out) of the amplitude of the sound recorded in the tape fragment. On the other hand, the fact that the angle is ascending or descending, or made with a double cut, doesn't make any sonic difference: because of the way in which sound is recorded on tape the result is always an amplitude fade. We don't know if Cage was aware of the fact that this part of the indications of his score was actually sonically purposeless, but on our side we had to decide how to deal with these information. We decided to give a *raison d'être* to these parameters: instead of simply applying fade-ins and fade-outs to the sounds, we used low-pass, high-pass, band pass and reject filters envelopes following the angles showed in the score. What was way more complicated was the rendering of the editing technique that asks for recorded sounds not to spool horizontally, but on a given diagonal:



We experimented a lot on tape with this effect, which is widely used throughout all the composition and that in Cage's words is meant to "produce an alteration in all the characteristics of the recorded sound", trying to understand what exactly happens to the sound. The results were quite discouraging as nothing more than a rumbling glitch - when not absolute silence - were obtained, no matter of what kind of sound was recorded on the tape fragment. A direct render of this on the computer is impossible (you can't "flip sounds" on Pro-tools..) and to "imitate" such poor results seemed not pertinent to the medium that we adopted. So we decided to "translate" Cage's indications into something new, applying to these sounds percentages of harmonic rotation in proportion with the angles of the diagonals showed in the score. The result is totally different from the original, but we think that our method still bears a certain conceptual closeness to Cage's idea.

Cage utilized the I Ching to organize the pieces of tape in the original version of the piece. What place have you accorded to chance in your version ?

Once we decided how to technically do the piece, there weren't many more "compositional" decisions to take. I mean, we just prepared a folder with all the hundreds of sound files that the score requires, and then we just "followed the recipe". It's kind of strange, because you can work six hours on Protools without really knowing what you are doing, it doesn't really even feel like making music... and at the end of the day you listen back to the maybe 30 seconds you made and... well, it sounds like Williams Mix. Saying this I don't mean that nothing of us is present in the work, it's probably quite true the opposite: we recorded and made all the sounds, and our taste is definitely present in these discrete units. In fact, according to John Cage, it was not necessary for the sounds used to demonstrate the required characteristics - "predictability" or "unpredictability" of pitch, overtone structure and amplitude - in their "natural" state: Cage allows the "engineers" to "have total freedom" to process, transform and control the parameters of the sounds through studio techniques. For instance Cage indicated that a sound **AVCV** - a "city sound" with variable pitch, controlled overtone structure and variable amplitude - could be "traffic having suffered a control of its overtone structure, through filters or reverberation".

Moreover, because of the way in which sounds are categorized another layer of subjectivity is given: what for me is predictable is maybe totally unpredictable for you... At the end, this piece is for us very much about a tension between predictability and unpredictability, constancy and variation, arbitrariness and chance, and our work is always oscillating between these opposites too.

The extract which I listened to on your site has a strange sense of closeness to the original work though the sounds are different. How do you explain this phenomenon ?

That was our first impression too, and it's quite strange when you think that our version is more or less 8 times longer than the original. Probably this happens because the score, despite its "openness", it's actually extremely specific [...]. Cage managed to produce an extremely strong and unique sonic "idea", hence a form, that remains absolutely transparent and clear despite its actual content.

In the end, don't you think that you will do a more performative version than the original for tape, which in 1952 seemed to be a nose-thumbing at the music concrete of Schaeffer and was written in the same spirit as the Bruit ism of Russolo ?

At an earlier stage we thought about including sounds that are produced on the spot and treated in real time with the effects required by the score, but we eventually dropped this idea, as the overall pace of the piece is really fast and it would have been nearly impossible to perform the right sound in the right place... So it's going to be a completely acousmatic performance. About Russolo, I wouldn't go too far on that direction: to my understanding Futurism was still very much attached to a "classical" vision of art. *L'Arte Dei Rumori* indulges a lot on the idea of substituting the old fashioned beauty of the orchestra with the avant-garde beauty of noises... Cage perspective in *Williams Mix* is very different, as he doesn't feel the need to substitute music with noise because he only thinks sound, and his goal wasn't beauty or pleasure or ecstasy but maybe trying to find a system to somehow imitate nature.

On the other hand the fact that Russolo categorizes noises in six families, and six are the sound families in *Williams Mix* is maybe not just a coincidence...