

that sine-wave sounds can be quite piercing, to say nothing of the highly unpredictable nature of the interference patterns & beats produced. A Lucier piece then is a kind of impossible fantasy, a dream of what he has called a fragile, spatially manifest “ecology” of sound. What Decibel give us is a highly complex, and densely material, negotiation of both the *appeal* of these concepts, & the rather clunky but beautiful sounds, warm overlays and microtonal fluctuations of these materials when harnessed in conjunction of what one might characterise as a *Surrealist bazaar of sound reproduction technology*. Like the flea-markets and junk shops which Ray & Andre Breton formerly prowled, Decibel’s mechanics of performance is rich in the “convulsive beauty” and strangely patinaed dance of objects and sounds which emerges from such a play of thingness within the audience’s perception. Hope herself rejects Lucier’s contention that sine-waves are “devoid of personality” or that they might be defined purely by “their functionality as tools.” She is rather adamant that she and her colleagues pose such sinusoidal oscillations of sound as instruments in their own right; objects with a character and a “presence” all of their own. Between the thingness of the instrument, the thingness of the sound, and the thingness of the performer, Decibel offer a rich choreography of objects and sounds, tones and pressures, failures & successes, which agitate the ear, the body, and the mind, in a manner rich and strange.

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# DECIBEL

## Works by Alvin Lucier

Liquid Architecture 11, 2010

The Performance Space, RRR Radio, Melbourne July 2  
Eugene Goosens Hall, ABC Studios, Sydney, July 3



## THINGNESS & SONIC ALCHEMY: DECIBEL PERFORMS ALVIN LUCIER

Publishing under the alias of “Isidoire Ducasse,” the Comte de Lautréamont famously described the dreamlike, potentially violent “chance encounter of a sewing machine & an umbrella on a dissecting table.” The Surrealist Man Ray was so enamoured of this image that he photographed a sculpture made of what one assumes to be a sewing machine, wrapped & bound in a horse blanket, bearing the title *The Enigma of Isidoire Ducasse* (1920). The Surrealist obsession with objects, & with their secret life, was so enigmatic, so cloaked in dense poetry, that Ray later destroyed the sculpture in question. Those re-creations which exist have not been unwrapped, so we will never know whether Lautréamont’s sewing machine is really twisting & writhing in ecstasy under its dangerous covers.

The Surrealist concern for objects might seem a strange place to commence a discussion of Decibel’s artistic director Cat Hope, and her ongoing fascination with the work of Alvin Lucier. I would however like to suggest that Lucier’s compositions are specifically designed to generate not “music” in the ordinary, conventional sense, nor indeed “art,” if by this one means a beautiful representation whose wondrous qualities transport us emotionally & psychologically to another realm. Lucier’s scores on the contrary generate *things*—his work is concerned with what Pierre Schaeffer (in a different context) called the “objet sonore”—whilst Decibel’s performative realisation of these works brings out another set of object-relations, namely those of the electronic mechanism, the synthesiser, the analogue recording device, amplification, & acoustic instrumentation.

Decibel’s repertoire on this occasion focuses particularly on Lucier’s works for sine-wave tone generators (oscillators). In pieces such as *Still & Moving Lines in Families of Hyperbolas* (1974) & *Ever Present* (2002), live performers on acoustic instruments are invited to produce sustained, extended tones, the frequency of which approaches and escapes that of the electronically generated oscillator tones. Because sound is manifest as waves of pressure in air, when the wave from the oscillator hits or bumps into one emanating from the live performer, so-called “beating” patterns, interference phenomena, & complex, spatially dispersed envelopes of sound arise. As multiple players & tone generators (human, clarinet, digital, magnetic, & so on) interact, & the frequency to which the oscillators are set is gently shifted, ever more rich intersections of sound & pressure fill the space. Lucier observes that, unlike 18th century pastoral music, which refers to visions of landscapes stretching before the listener’s imagination, or Romantic composition, in which the sounds evoke the emotional depths of an imagined character (usually the composer or the protagonist of an opera, as with Richard Wagner or Robert Schumann), Lucier’s own pieces focus on the actual “physical phenomenon” of what is “happening in your [own] room. They’re not a document of what has happened in some other room.” Like John Cage, Lucier strives to craft what he calls “a non-subjective music ... attained by using neutral procedures devoid of personal choices or predilections.” Lucier’s music is not, therefore, “about” anything, in the ordinary sense. Stuart Marshall claims that the trajectory of Western art music has been towards increasing “asignification”—that is to say, sound or music which is about sound or music, rather than about anything other than itself. Lucier likens listening to his pieces to listening to a river; the sound is just there, happening, with no especially refined structure, beginning, middle, or end to order it. It just is.

This then is the *secret life of sound as object*. Indeed, Lucier’s model of sound is so material & concrete, that it can only truly exist in one place at one time. The composer observes that “every room has its own melody, hiding there until you make it audible,” and since many of his compositions depend on how sound bounces off surfaces or how waves of pressure move between walls, Lucier’s compositions are specifically located in the spaces within which they are performed. Stuart Marshall notes however that despite the seductive

nature of this poetical conceit, this idea of just “finding” the “hidden melody” of a site—or what Lucier in another context has described as “using Beethoven” or other sonic waveform “like a found object”—this is actually an impossible fantasy. As Paul Chan notes, “a work of art is both more & less than a thing.” Echoing the Surrealists, the influential art critic W.J.T. Mitchell has pointed out that in 20th century art, “thingness”—or the existence of an aesthetic experience or concept as a *material object*—represents a kind of problem or limiting condition of art. “Things are no longer passively waiting,” Mitchell says, for us to classify & aestheticise them. On the contrary, “‘The Thing’ rears its head ... [as] a repressed returnee, an obdurate materiality, a stumbling block, & an object lesson.”

Nowhere does this seem more true than in the beautiful & strangely pathetic, obdurately material means with which Decibel realises Lucier’s scores. Decibel’s artistic statement includes a commitment to featuring “electronic & acoustic instruments ... side by side,” thereby giving each of these mechanisms “its own voice.” It is not then disembodied sound or music which calls out to the listener in these concerts, nor is it an immaterial sculpture made of nothing more than vibrations in the aether, which draws us in. It is instead a living web of technology, circuits, analogue transformers, boxed speakers, coils of wire & cable, structures of wood, plastic & brass, & above all, the almost tragically inescapable human presence of the performers themselves, caught in this nexus of machine & data. It is something of an in-joke that, in post-classical concert performance, musicians are supposed to dress in a neutral black suit or skirt, so that they might almost dissolve into the air along with the music itself, to become as incidental & quasi invisible as the standard black hi-fi system which I am currently listening to Decibel on as I type out this essay on a grotty, coffee-stained keyboard. But the more one might argue that Decibel’s performers seem to be disappearing, the more visible they actually become. Indeed, their black attire & their cool demeanour makes their similarity to the speakers & to the various sound systems they employ even more obvious, as indeed Hope is aware, as she and her collaborators play with these issues in performance.

In a review of Decibel’s 2010 realisation of the Lucier’s *In Memoriam Stuart Marshall* (1993), Darren Jorgensen notes that clarinettist Lindsay Vickery’s attempt to follow & echo the sine-wave tones in the piece recalled a “battle between human and machine” wherein “the appearance of classical instruments alongside ... an electronically generated pitch rendered them grotesque, [showing] the human breath [to be] a distorted and messy medium.” Through this clearly audible stream of forced air, the suck of the mouth, and the wet accent of accumulated spittle, Vickery, Decibel, the computer, the sound wave, and all of these associated elements emerged as dramatically abject and thing-like in turn; as a series of floppy & highly provisional structures of air and material that smash aural expressiveness. What I am trying to suggest is the tragedy of these performances. The fantastic impossibility of Lucier’s compositions as identified by Stuart Marshall makes the live performance function in a manner akin to Lautréamont’s dissecting table, where objects, things, desires, affects, & elements of beauty & ugliness, are dissected & recombined in beautiful & frightening forms.

Philip Auslander has claimed that works such as those by Lucier bring to the fore the inevitable gap between the score & the performance. No music is ever performed *exactly* or *as perfectly* as the immaterial, imagined notational elements (scores, texts, instructions, and so on) marked out in the manuscript. On the one hand, Lucier is insistent that whilst an earlier artist like Beethoven could act as a “brilliant ... smelter, or transformer of raw materials. But the idea of shaping & hammering raw material into a product no longer holds any interest for me.” Nevertheless, Lucier has also compared his process to “alchemy,” through which one might “transform base metals into pure gold.” Perhaps the key term here though is *baseness* rather than *smelting* or *transformation*. Lucier recognises not just the humble nature of the materials he works with, but also their messy, problematic, even at times quite ugly, thing-like characteristics. As Hope notes in her writings, analogue oscillators have a tendency to fluctuate in tone due to intermittent surges in the power supply, to which I would add the fact