Elsewhere: In Defense of Daydreaming

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Elsewhere: In Defense of Daydreaming

by Alex Braden

A thesis presented to the
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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INTRODUCTION

Sound can wake a sleeping fetus.¹ Most of what a pre-birth human learns about the world is through listening. But after that most consequential coincidence of being born, much of what we memorize to survive competes with our innate ability to listen curiously and sincerely. We learn to be wary of silence,² cautious of the world, and suspicious of each other. My multidisciplinary sound-based work is about suspending these defenses and embodying our pre-birth sensibilities. My work hinges on remembering how to unflex, remembering how to melt, remembering how to listen.

I am an artist working in collaborative performance, sculptural objects, and composed audio for installation. I mine for frisson— the skin-tingling bodily response to something unexpected or beautiful in music—fusing the corporeal and the indefinite. My work references and reinterprets systems I learned studying and performing classical, jazz, popular, experimental, and church music. I build aural environments that emphasize physically engaged listening. I construct sonic sanctuaries and situations that inspire pause; and I offer these environments as opportunities to reconnect with our bodies, our senses, our memory, and each other.

In the following pages, I will meander among recurrent questions that I mull over at work in my studio; and I will describe in narrative form memories that have contributed to who I am
and why I make work of this kind. I will interview works by other artists and words by other thinkers as they relate to my practice, and I will describe both my own process of making and the final forms in a handful of my own works. I will engage all these narratives inside the main text, in footnotes, and endnotes—primarily in the present tense. This is because I believe that while memory is as good as fiction, the present (illusory as it might be) \(^3\) borders truth: the present is the restless, formless, bodiless boundary between deeper myths of a past and future—the present is the stream of consciousness on which we happily, helplessly float. What I hope to offer in the following pages is an experience not unlike dozing off while listening to a record or closing one’s eyes at a crowded beach. What I mean to defend in my writing, as in my work, is the significance of losing oneself in a daydream.
YOU REALLY HAD TO BE THERE

(FOR IT TO HAPPEN)

My intention in putting the stories together in an unplanned way was to suggest that all things—stories, incidental sounds from the environment, and, by extension, beings—are related, and that this complexity is more evident when it is not oversimplified by an idea of relationship in one person's mind.⁴

Figure 1. Alex Braden, performance documentation of *Movement I: MOIRA*, 2022, 35mm film scan.
Movement I: MOIRA, 2022,¹ is unique among recent works for its predetermined musical score. I compose the music starting from two sound samples. The first is a personal favorite, “Killing Time” by Nicolas Jaar, a nine-minute piece of music taking Chilean nationalism to task. The lyrics of the Jaar mantra are sung,

We’re all
Just waiting
For the old folks to die⁵

The original track masterfully layers a series of disparate textures including flags flapping in the wind and footsteps in a creek. I am most interested in imbuing the spirit of this piece into Movement I: MOIRA, 2022, while the lyrics—in my opinion, a little too overtly connected to the work in progress—would allow “Killing Time” to define MOIRA as a reproduction. So I sample and loop Jaar’s textures and layer my own voice atop it, humming the original refrain and adding my own three-part harmony to it. Then I borrow from another favorite by Moses Sumney. I loop one simple stanza from Doomed’s bridge and flesh it out with my own instrumentation: guitar, synthesizer, and rhythmic field recordings. Later in the song, Sumney sings,

I feel the peeling
Of half painted ceilings
Reveal the covering of a gray sky
Am I vital
If my heart is idle
Am I doomed?⁶

---

¹ [Elsewhere] The lightproof door resembles a larger-than-life vacuum tube canister from a retired bank drive-through: a vertical cylinder with a human-width opening on one side, I sidle into it and pause in its center as I manually rotate the door around me. For a moment, I’m in complete darkness as the opaque, rounded walls of the tube seal the entrance behind me; but as the cavity slowly aligns with the opening in front of me, the light from the other side flows in, hitting me first as a dim sliver, then a large crack, and finally comprising another body-sized rectangle, through which I step into the film developing room where I am going to eventually print images from Movement I: MOIRA, 2022.
Figure 2. Alex Braden, performance documentation of *Movement I: MOIRA*, 2022, 120mm film scan.
The score is mapped to a video shot in one take, which I choreographed along with three performers who navigate the Kemper collection, holding a series of poses as they go. Live, visitors use mobile devices and headphones to follow the video around the space while, in no apparent order and over the course of a few hours, the performers reenact the poses. The piece terminates in front of the Ebony G. Patterson installation, *In the Waiting, the Weighting*, 2021, a fitting visual harmony for Nicolas Jaar’s sample. The score and the video are predetermined, but the live movement of the performers—when or if they sync up with the video at all—is completely indeterminate.ii As the performance continues, the act of comparing the living

ii. Walking in, three sensations occur simultaneously. In contrast to the warm, sterile silence of the tube, entering this space, I’m enveloped by a din; I’m colder; and my nose flinches. The air I walk into shivers with a hiss and hum from a water regulator. Set to 68 degrees, the silvery box on the wall contributes a familiar timbre to this small room. The machine maintains a thin, fuzzy, white–noise–esque drone as water passes through its narrow pipes. It bellows somewhat rhythmically as its coils cool or heat the incoming water. From time to time, usually when the spigot is opened or closed, it rattles to a stop or start as the loosely mounted copper and PVC pipes around it slap the wall and each other as changing internal pressure throws them in or out of balance.
physical forms to the images inside the handheld video—watching the two phase in and out of agreement—is, for me, not unlike comparing a memory to an old photograph.

For many of us, our olfactory memory is our most palpable. I read once that while traveling you should bring a new perfume that you stop using upon return. Later, when you want to unlock forgotten sensory memory from your trip, spray a little of the perfume on your wrist and you’ll be instantly transported back to your vacation in full-body sensorial facsimile that makes journaling feel perfunctory, one-dimensional, and antique: like watching analog television.

In How Art Can Be Thought, Al-An suggests that memory loss, to an extent, might be a grace:

_________________________

iii. Here in the developing room, the air is cooler than outside, sharper too: the cubes and bladders of development chemistry are stable at 68 degrees, which, matching the water regulator, the room’s HVAC is programmed to maintain. The chemistry is also extremely fragrant with—not an aroma, not quite a stench, but—a pungent, ammonia–like quality that defines this place.

iv. Whether the memory conjured by this perfume practice is reliable or not is likely unprovable. I’m sitting across the table from Al-An deSouza at a tiny, upscale Mexican restaurant in a burgeoning neighborhood of South City. Outside, the wind is whipping up already sub-freezing temperatures into the kind of night that keeps you indoors, but inside it's warm enough for cocktails over ice, and between sips, Al-An is discussing their photography practice and how the image has the potential to replace memory. Regarding an old family photo, they ask, do I actually remember being there? Or do I see myself in the photograph, and that seeing myself reinforces—creates anew?—a memory, not of being in the pictured moment (that feeling is long lost) but a memory of being in that image.

v. The camera is covered in a rubbery yellow-grey that Canon advertises as waterproof; but the vessel is costly, and I’ve never been allowed to test its seaworthiness in my grandparents' pool. No time for all that though; it's the holidays. Detroit—in the 1990s, anyway—is frigid and guaranteed to be snowy, so the pool was emptied and covered months ago.

I am in their living room, I am sitting at their upright piano, I am wearing a bowtie, and I am looking up at that yellow-grey Nikon. I’ve been alive for four-ish years, and this is the oldest image I have of myself making music, or this is my earliest memory of playing piano, or both, or maybe neither.
“Sensory memory” consists of automatically acquired sensory data that begins degrading within a second of acquisition. If this were not the case we would be overloaded by constant sensory input that we wouldn’t be able to forget. These processes are notoriously unreliable, affected by suggestion, (mis)information, correlation, dramatization upon recall, and emotional significance, to list only a few factors that affect their variability.\footnote{8}

Figure 4. Alex Braden, *Decanter I: Prelude for Solo Piano*, 2022

I’m told I naturally took to the piano at four. I’m told I taught myself to read around that same time. I remember distinctly a few years later, as more and more siblings arrived and the neighbors started asking about our schooling, the lot of us moved a few hours closer to Canada, into a modular home on a small acreage at the end of a long gravel driveway that took more than a few minutes by bike to fetch the mail or sneak a peek at the school bus dropping off neighbor kids. I’m pretty sure the yellow-grey Minolta made it there with us, but I’m not sure it came with us to the next house because I know for a fact that all the rumors of my fifth sister’s adoption stem simply from the local pharmacy losing all the negatives from her first two years of life, at which point I think my superstitious mother may have decided to splurge on a new camera.
I record the soundtrack to the documentary video of *Decanter I: Prelude for Solo Piano*, 2022, by taping a contact mic to the piano harp; I aim a directional ribbon microphone at its strings and place a pair of condenser mics just outside the frame. Out of the resulting hour or so of audio, I edit out all ambient noise (HVAC cycles, footsteps from the office building next door, passing traffic), compress what remains, sync it drop by drop to the silent camera footage, and then automate synthetic room reverb to every camera angle to confirm the illusion of space. This does not need to convey reality; it simply needs to sound realistic.

As they are anguished over in the discourses of fidelity, speculations on the relation between original and copy operate as placeholders for concerns about the social process of sound reproduction itself...In short, we treat reproduction as an artifact of human life instead of as an ontological condition.⁹

Adding digital reverberation—which, by the way, a computer accomplishes in its most basic formula by repeating tiny samples of a recording very quickly at a decreasing volume—to footage of *Decanter I: Prelude for Solo Piano*, 2022 accepts the reproduction as an ontological condition: on second thought, there is no soundtrack and there is no copy.¹⁰ From here it is possible to understand how affect changes between the two because they are different realities⁶ altogether.

vi. I am sitting on the floor of the Carriage House. Two rooms away, the Georgian Ambassador to the United States is being served tea. Last week, I ushered U2’s Bono from a green room to a limo outside the Washington Hilton. Next week, we are expecting one of the Clintons. This morning, a congressperson from Nevada led our bible study on the importance of integrity, on maintaining one’s values and standards when alone the same as in public.

A few years later, an audio engineer friend of mine working for NatGeo is telling me that no video of the desert is believable without the sound of a Red-tailed Hawk in the distance, regardless of how plausible the existence of that species of bird in that environment actually is. On the floor of the Carriage House, I’m being told by our veteran work crew leader that I’m taking too long to repair this molding, that I’m wasting materials, that I need to remember that painting is not about the cracks and crevices, it’s not even about the details, it’s not about wholly changing color or about fully sealing a surface: it’s about fooling the eye. A few years later, the Nevada congressman will make D.C. and national headlines when word of his extramarital affair is leaked. Fidelity, in many forms, can be a ruse.
Anyway, the hearing of a sound is what makes it. In fact, our ears are not passive receivers of sound. They are active participants in the process of hearing, making their own vibrations. On whether a falling tree makes a sound if no one is around to hear it, Jonathan Sterne concludes that, no, “sound is a product of the human senses and not a thing in the world apart from humans.” However, he says, “I am aware that the squirrel might offer a different interpretation.” Sterne is perhaps a bit more concerned with the definition of sound and the faculty of hearing than I am as I EQ this illusion of sound in my video documentation of Decanter I: Prelude for Solo Piano, 2022. But if we agree that the ear and the brain are sound-producing agents, prompted by vibration, rather than receptors of autonomous sound, then encountering any pattern of interpretable vibrations will always be subjective and unique to each listener over time.

The boundary between sound and not-sound is based on the understood possibilities of the faculty of hearing—whether we are talking about a human or a squirrel. Therefore, as people and squirrels change, so too will sound—by definition.
My highlighted image from *Decanter: Prelude for Solo Piano*, 2022, depicts the over-twelve-foot-tall rectangular wooden structure in dramatic lighting, just off-center and about twenty feet away. The structure is minimal—a frame really—but it is striking in how it occupies space without being massive. At this focal length, one can make out a gutted piano harp resting on a pile of dirt, but only by approaching it can one see the ice blocks resting atop the structure. Similarly in this image, the drips—the activators of this work—may as well be invisible; but detail shots can prove that the strings of the piano are randomly struck by falling water droplets from the melting ice. That water accumulates below the strings and flows down the tilted hardwood resonator onto a bed of soil, organics, and aromatics. To capture one of my favorite detail shots, I place the camera in the dirt, just at the delta of the water’s escape from the bronze
frame and coiled wire strings of the hardwood piano harp. There, something spontaneous is
growing from my sound-making experiment: a tuft of young grass is poking through the soil and
aromatics. The absurd and the organic evolve at a similar tempo. vii

vii. I am standing in dirt, ash, and wet grass too close to a very warm orange-white campfire I
just rearranged with a few kicks. It’s chilly; I can see my breath, and my fingers are stiff, but my
toes are hot. I notice my boots are steaming; I step back. I look up and to the West. I see the
scraggly indigo-purple of a pre-dawn sky behind the furry deep green-black mass of the nearest
Blue Ridge Mountains tree line, just across the valley. I lean backwards toward the East and look
straight up. No one can deny the pleasures of looking at the night sky.*

We are only a few hours into 2022. A small group of friends and I are gathered at a
family farm in Fort Valley, VA to ring in the new year as we’ve done annually for almost a
decade. At this point in the evening, our conversation is calmer, spottier, more sentimental than
our earlier reveling, but the dead silence that follows is a noticeable shift.

One hand loves the other,
So much on me,
Björk’s soprano echoes off the house, off the shed, off the neighboring pines and cedar, and—
this could be the whiskey talking, but—I swear I can hear a faint Icelandic echo from across the
valley. Not bad for a Bluetooth speaker. Filtered, finger picked, and synthetic room-drenched
cello comes next: a downbeat four (Bb), a syncopated four, a quick grace note four before a
downbeat five (C), one more five before the three (A), leading us right back to that Bb…

Born stubborn, me,
Will always be,
High register feedback, soft and in the distance, hot like what Hollywood imagines scanning a
desert horizon to sound like reinforces (barely) the chord structure now looped by the cello.

Before you count one, two, three,
A staccato pattern of string-like synth chords starts to fill in the gaps.
I will have grown my own private branch,
Of this tree,**

A too drunk friend has been shushed for trying to reopen conversation. Our communal silence is
now an accord. We are looking at each other; we are looking at the stars; we are looking at the
fire; we are listening, and finally, we are speechless.

Figure 6. Alex Braden, *Decanter I: Prelude for Solo Piano*, 2022.
One of my few language-centering works is *Squeeze III: King of the Forest*, 2023. It relies on two electrified copper pipes, which, when a rotating tube of stranded copper touches both, trigger
either a sentence from Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree*, 1964, or a musical, gong-like pitch from a synthesizer. viii

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viii. I am standing astride *SQUEEZE III: King of the Forest*. I am listening to a remixed text and accompanying non-linguistic soundtrack which transpires as follows:

```
After a long time
She loved a little boy
And the tree was happy
[gong]
But not really
[gong]
So the boy cut off her branches
But the boy stayed away for a long time
[gong]
[gong]
Then one day the boy came to the tree
But time went by
[gong]
Once there was a tree
And she loved a little boy
[gong]
I am very tired
I am just an old stump
Come, Boy, sit down
[gong]
And play king of the forest
And the boy did
[gong]
```
I never think much about mushrooms beyond cooking until I hear a conversation between media theorist Douglas Rushkoff and systems engineer (and myco-enthusiast) Jeff Emmett. The theory they discuss, while somewhat scatological and perhaps a little playful, purports that, rewinding many epochs in the evolution of humans, we follow cows around as a source of meat and milk. The cows’ manure, which we do not eat, decomposes with the help of fungi that grows into mushrooms—and those we do eat. These mushrooms stimulate our brains and create all sorts of synesthetic experiences: colors have sounds, sounds suddenly seem to have smells, smells inspire thought, and over time, we develop a pattern of signs and symbols that eventually evolves into language. In short, language is bullshit.
Figure 9. Alex Braden, *SQUEEZE III: King of the Forest*, 2023.

Elsewhere, John Cage—who once nearly died in the woods eating what he thought was skunk cabbage—moves to the country for the express purpose of learning about music by devoting
himself to the mushroom. In a somewhat tongue in cheek *Music Lovers’ Field Companion*, 1961, he proposes,

To begin with, I propose that it should be determined which sounds further the growth of which mushrooms; whether these latter, indeed, make sounds of their own; whether the gills of certain mushrooms are employed by appropriately small-winged insects for the production of pizzicato and the tubes of the Boleti by minute burrowing ones as wind instruments; whether the spores, which in size and shape are extraordinarily various, and in number countless, do not on dropping to the earth produce gamelan-like sonorities; and finally, whether all this enterprising activity which I suspect delicately exists, could not, through technological means, be brought, amplified and magnified, into our theatres with the net result of making our entertainments more interesting.\(^\text{19}\)

Figure 10. Alex Braden, *SQUEEZE III: King of the Forest*, 2023.
All anybody wants to talk about are the oranges, and it’s driving me mad.

I sample two songs in *Fugue as in Neighbor or Weigh*, 2021: the first is *Tin Angel*, 1969, by Joni Mitchell, and the second is *Bowl of Oranges*, 2002, by Bright Eyes. Often, my original thought or the seed of a new work is a beloved song, a lyric, or a melody, that I reference,
reconfigure, mangle, sample, or layer, slowly growing it into something new. Once the work is realized and nearly complete, I package the piece with a title, some words to point toward what I’ve been thinking about as I made it, or to connect concepts that I deliberately kept apart in the making of the work. Once I establish clarity via titling (typically at the last minute), I often change or add to the work in a final gestural moment of spontaneity.

For me, *Tin Angel* is a song about inertia and transition, about being caught between hanging onto memories and embracing the present. Mitchell lists—in a morose cadence that feels dim and dusty, not unlike Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s abandoned studio in *The Dark Pool, 1995*—mementos, detritus, and gifts from a past lover. Not wanting to forget, she’s held onto these physical objects, but now, in the presence of an approaching new love she muses,

I guess I’ll throw them all away,
I found someone to love today.

In *Bowl of Oranges*, Conor Oberst imagines what kind of understanding could be gained from distilling one’s life into a collection of objects and painting them onto a canvas: an existence embodied by a still life.
By way of title, *Fugue as in Neighbor or Weigh*, 2021 accepts a few definitions. The first is a musical form (and for me, a studio practice) whereby a musical phrase is introduced by one part and successively taken up by other parts, eventually developed and renewed by interweaving those parts over time. The second is a psychological state having to do with the temporary loss of awareness of identity, occasionally coupled with flight from one’s usual environment. Third, the title references a mnemonic device (sounding like “A”) that I used as a child learning to read.

_Fugue as in Neighbor or Weigh_, 2021 centers a video projected through a scrim and onto a wall. The wall projection is largely out of focus, and the scrim is easily rustled by listeners.
entering or leaving the space. But when motionless, the video—showing a series of trees passing above—can be seen in clarity on the surface of the scrim. It is, for me, the feeling of falling in and out of sleep looking up through the moonroof of my family’s station wagon on long drives back to our rural Michigan home. The video is soundtracked and subtitled; my four-year-old son is half asleep playing a bedtime word game we made up, listing metaphors, comparisons, and hyperboles to describe the love we share:

    Even darker than nighttime
    Even taller than a skyscraper
    Even bigger than a T-Rex

Toward the end of Fugue’s eight-minute runtime, the Bright Eyes and Joni Mitchell samples, having been reworked and woven together, coalesce with a handful of other musical themes for a dramatic musical climax. For that impulsive finishing touch, I place a glass bowl full of large navel oranges on a pedestal between the scrim and wall, which seems to tie everything together quite nicely. Feedback on this work inspires an entire series. All anybody wants to talk about are the oranges.

    Behind the work of any creative artist there are three principle wishes: the wish to make something, the wish to perceive something…and the wish to communicate these perceptions to others…Those who have no interest in communication do not become artists either; they become mystics or madmen.
Figure 13. Alex Braden, *SQUEEZE I*, 2021.
Figure 14. Alex Braden, *SQUEEZE II*, 2022.
I am standing among eleven other artists in the shadow of a large mess of still-wet oil paint smeared onto an Ikea cowhide rug nailed to a wall. In the foreground, the paint—via thick graphic outlines—describes the posterior of a cow looking back toward the viewer as she gives birth to a calf. The background of the painting depicts a stock Big Sky Country-esque mountain range horizon. This particular studio stinks of spray paint thanks to graffiti freshly applied directly to the wall surrounding the hide. We are gathered here to offer feedback on this work, but none of us are paying any attention to the painting quite yet. Each of us has been handed a printout of twelve questions and a printed PDF of Susan Sontag’s Against Interpretation. We came here to improvise, and now we have been scripted.

There is a time—well before this particular critique—when I too think I can hide behind Susan Sontag. Frustrated with lazy reads of my work, I think that rejecting interpretation is the key to no longer being misunderstood. However, today, what I understand about—or perhaps, how I now interpret—Against Interpretation is not as postmodern as this painter needs it to be. Sontag, prior to suggesting that good acts of criticism [should] supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art,29 echoes Haskell’s concerns30 regarding the failures of language to describe sensory experience:

What is needed is a vocabulary—a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary—for forms [One of the difficulties is that our idea of form is spatial (the Greek metaphors for form are all derived from notions of space). This is why we have a more ready vocabulary of forms for the spatial than the temporal arts.]}31

And she seems to agree with Rushkoff regarding art’s affective potential when she claims that “real art has the capacity to make us nervous.”32

The missing ingredient can't be directly stated, immediately observed, or processed by algorithm, but it's there in the moment before it is named or depicted or resolved.33

And deSouza:
The artwork is not wholly causal with the viewer being passively acted upon. The viewer has varying degrees of agency in how they respond. A Mark Rothko painting might provoke a deeply spiritual, meditative response from one viewer, while another might see it only as unsettling, fuzzy blocks of color. In neither case is the work itself meditative. If there is a meditative effect, it could not be said with certainty that the cause is the painting. The viewer’s predisposition or desire might be projected onto the painting as an appropriate stimulus.\(^{34}\)

Now we start to wonder if Sontag—like Haskell, like deSouza, like Rushkoff—is less concerned with neutering the artistic-critical intellect, and more interested in defending subjectivity, as it relates to the body, the senses, and understanding.

Standing here, in the shadow of this cowhide, with a now sore throat from spray paint fumes, I realize: this prescriptive critique is a rigged election. This is totalitarian aesthetics. Sontag was in no way a proponent of telling people what to think; Sontag rued an inability to linguistically express the nuance of a subjective response to art. To be told by this artist what is and what is not appropriate to discuss regarding their work is to spit on Sontag’s grave. This artist has already interpreted their own work, and they are now prompting us to confirm their own biases and grand illusions of authorship.\(^{35}\) This is no rejection of interpretation; this is no erotics of art;\(^{36}\) this is fascism.

A beautiful trapping of sound, if in fact it is incomplete without a listener, is the release of authorship. If listening creates the heard, then the artist, while an actant in the creation of work, is not, ultimately, an author.

The majority of people today feel isolated and detached from art, and all the well-meaning orientations and explanations that fill them with facts about the meanings in the work and intentions of the artists, in my opinion, only serve to separate them further from the inner life of the art before them. As countless artists have stated before, the appreciation, as well as the making, of art demands a primacy of perception, an open child-like state of vulnerability and emotive sensitivity.\(^{37}\)
Standing here incredulous, I realize that with my work I am trying to inspire a feeling, not a thought. In my work, I hope to avoid didactics; I hope to be subtle; I want to be nuanced. Sound relies on subjectivity of affect. Interpretation is not the enemy of intellect; it is the final stage of the work. You have to be there. If you are not present, the work is not either. The work requires a listener, it needs life, needs the body. Sound exists in the present tense. My work requires a physical presence and a wandering mind.

Our experience of [sound] recalls how memory can be both an evocation of past events and a confusion of subconscious associations.38
THE MUSEUM IS A PLACE OF DEATH

I think of all the senses as being unified. I do not consider sound as separate from image. We usually think of the camera as an "eye" and the microphone as an "ear," but all the senses exist simultaneously in our bodies, interwoven into one system that includes sensory data, neural processing, memory, imagination, and all the mental events of the moment. This all adds up to create the larger phenomenon we call experience.

I am walking into Delcy Morelos’ human-height soil maze near the entrance to The Milk of Dreams, and I am overwhelmed with the sweet-dry, tannic smell of cinnamon and cacao. Seeing it in person, I realize that the intrigue and mystery, the essence of Uffe Isolotto’s haunting centaur family scene in the Netherlands Pavilion, would be impotent without the taste of hay and barn dust in the air. Outside the Australian pavilion, I can hear the distorted onslaught, but only on entering the space does my body react to the pressure shift. My chest tightens, my joints shift, and my intestines seem to contract as Marco Fusinato’s monolithic wall of guitar amplifiers growls at and throttles my body. My pores constrict with the temperature and humidity as I step finally from beneath a midday Venice summer sun into the damp, cool interior of the Pavilion of Chile; how the thick, boggy mist and the aroma of ageless organic life encompasses me. I inhale deeply the peatmoss of Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol. Encouraged by docents, I run my fingers through a misty, leafy bog. On the way out, my wrist is spritzed with an essential oil whose aroma stays with me well into the evening.
Figure 15. Delcy Morelos, *Earthly Paradise*, 2022.

Figure 16. Uffe Isolotto, *We Walked the Earth*, 2022.
Figure 5. Marco Fusinato, *DESASTRES*, 2022.

Figure 6. *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol*, 2022.
None of these Venice Biennale works would be acceptable in the Kemper exhibition:

Prohibited materials. Many materials may not be allowed in the Museum spaces because of risk to other artwork, the facility, and its occupants. This list includes, but is not limited to:

- Open flames
- Wet surfaces
- Food
- Living materials
- Un-encapsulated liquids
- Hazardous materials/actions

The Museum staff reserves the right to refuse artwork that may put the Museum at risk.42

The Museum, in its celebration of archival media, does its best to preserve their art objects,43 to conquer materials, and to conquer time.44 But just as a painting is impotent in a dark room, sound does not exist without a listener, and the phenomenon of listening (much like looking) is subjective according to time, place, and body. The museum is a pickling cellar, not a greenhouse. Funded by dead money,45 guided by the will of the dead, largely collecting dead artists, and primarily enshrining dead media, its curators—or can we say, morticians—somberly pulse—check anything rolled through the doors to be sure that it’s cold, dead enough to not thaw the collection. Is it any wonder that wall text is called tombstones? The museum is a place of death.
IN DEFENSE OF DAYDREAMING

My piece currently at the Kemper is called *Decanter II: In Defense of Daydreaming*, 2023. It consists of a symmetrical, somewhat elaborate wooden frame, a large wooden platform suspended by musical strings, tensioned by guitar tuners, holding a vinyl player that rotates a microphone stand, which in turn holds a steel arm with a tuft of stranded copper at the end. Each pair of steel strings is connected to a sampler and when the stranded copper strikes two wires at once, 5V of electricity passes through both, triggering a randomized note from a sampler, which is connected to a pair of speakers hidden inside the platform. The frame, the structure, is not necessary to the sound. I can suspend this from the ceiling just as easily, and the platform is heavy enough; it does not need to hover above ground to tension the strings. But I appreciate that, working with sound, an invisible medium, I still find myself carefully building this beautiful thing that could or could not be there.
For me, this reconnects to the idea of listening creating the heard. My work is objectively incomplete without a listener. Biologically, we know that it is the capacity of the human ear that defines the boundaries of what we accept as sound. For me, this wooden frame defines the boundaries of this work and creates a space for decanting the sound. I also want to create something somewhat precarious. These analog objects are being used to make sound, but not as they were designed to. Entropic materials like stranded copper or steel wire can erode, stretch

Figure 7. Alex Braden, *Decanter II: In Defense of Daydreaming*, 2023.
and snap—I’m drawn to these materials just as I am to previously discussed ideas about impermanence and the subjectivity of experience.

Figure 20. Alex Braden, *Decanter II: In Defense of Daydreaming*, 2023.

Further, I want to create a framework or a system wherein sound can occur, and then step away. Studying jazz, I am often assigned famous solos as homework. I am asked to listen closely to these improvised, recorded events and transcribe them into sheet music. Jazz improvisation is not without structure. John Coltrane’s famous *Giant Steps*, 1960 solo is completely improvised, but it follows the changes, the chord arrangement, even when his pianist cannot.46 Years later, that improvisation is all but canonized, living on in recordings, transcriptions, and the annals of music history. Via *Decanter II: In Defense of Daydreaming*, 2023, I mimic that improvisational lifecycle. The grid of the structure and the repetition of the
circular movement are predictable, constant. And the sounds the piece can make are finite, much like the timbral boundaries of a tenor saxophone. But the melody, what happens within that structure, is completely indeterminate.

Figure 21. Alex Braden, Decanter II: In Defense of Daydreaming, 2023.

Too often, in my opinion, sound in the fine art space is described as or reduced to being meditative. Not only am I tired of it, but I think that terms like meditation are unfortunately dead in the West.\textsuperscript{47} Leading up to this thesis work, I decided to try talking about daydreaming instead. Partly, as Al-An deSouza suggests,\textsuperscript{48} because daydreaming is considered to be unproductive as opposed to meditation, which, like art, is meant to be good for us. But even beyond the gallery, terms like meditation, wellness, and well-being have been bastardized in the context of
capitalism. Co-opted as a means to an end, meditation in many cases has been reduced to readiness for and resilience to good scrum work.49

Meanwhile, deferring the trance that meditation connotes, daydreaming, to me, suggests a lingering consciousness. Good art should remind us we are alive; it may—and maybe should—absolutely enrapture us, but it should celebrate sentience.

Art makes us think in novel ways, leading us to consider new approaches and possibilities. It induces states of mind that are often strange and uncomfortable. Rather than putting us to sleep, art wakes us up and invites us to experience something about being human that is in danger of being forgotten.50

Perhaps it’s semantics, but what I like about daydreaming is that, for now, it is not understood as a means to productivity.
Amazon Introduces Tiny ‘ZenBooths’ for Stressed-Out Warehouse Workers

The Amazon meditation booth is a small room where employees can watch company videos about mindfulness while a small fan moves the air around.

Figure 23. Alex Braden, Screenshot of article on Amazon's employee meditation program, 2023.

4 Powerful Ways Mindfulness Encourages Peak Performance

Figure 24. Alex Braden, Screenshot of Forbes article on mindfulness, 2023.
You don’t daydream to perform better at your Silicon Valley job, and you don’t daydream to take smarter risks when day trading stocks.

It has been said that Pauline Oliveros paved a path for ethical meditation.⁵¹ I would argue, however, that if, in the late 1970s, Oliveros could see ahead to the success of the inauthentic and appropriative self–help industry and the implementation of meditation by corporations to squeeze better labor out of workers, she may have thought twice before proliferating the term. I would further argue that quitting one’s job to study Buddhism⁵² or attending lengthy mountain retreats in Vegas⁵³ defines a certain level of privilege and free time that the average human laborer, especially in the 2020s, does not have access to.

But that’s not to say that the tenets of meditation, by any other name (and with a lessened sense of privilege) is pointless in my view, because I wonder, as Oliveros did, if listening can reconnect us to our bodies, to each other, to recover the absurdity of being alive in an evolutionary and cultural period when dissonance and predictability have been monetized and our attention has never been more profitable.

With my work, I hope to offer a more accessible deep listening than Oliveros did with her retreats, outside the opportunistic self–help industry, and without late capitalism’s labor abuses. I wonder if daydreaming, defined simply by listening, can help us return to our bodies and recover our senses. After all, listening is a right brain activity; it activates the entire body. Full body listening activates emotions and imagination in unpredictable ways.⁵⁴ Neuroanatomist Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, whose stroke gave her the unlikely opportunity to directly confront the inner workings of her own brain and consciousness, now believes that, “the more time we spend choosing to run the deep inner peace circuitry of our right hemispheres, the more peace we will project into the world, and the more peaceful our planet will be.”⁵⁵ In an inversion of the
sleeping, submerged fetus awoken by sound, I wonder if engaging with immersive sound can lull a conscious human into a daydream, and if that practice is contagious.

Returning to how the auditory birth of a human child precedes its exit from the womb by a few months and how when we’re finally born most of us have already been learning about the world through sound: by the time we are born, we are deeply familiar with a handful of nearly musical patterns: the tenor and melody of our mother’s voice, her pulse, the drum of her heart, the rhythm and wisp of her lungs. I suppose I’m wondering if it’s possible that humans and sound are connected by our earliest memories? If so, is it also possible that we are bound to music by our nurtured predisposition to the rhythm and the melody of the body? In my current work, I hope to address sound as possibly the connecting thread that points to our earliest memories, and by investigating that area of experience, I hope to create works that involve the body’s predisposition to rhythm and melody of its own self.56

Listening is survival.57
NOTES


2. “Existence in the lighted world is connected to a forcible loss we can never really fathom: for humans, from the first moment on, being in the world involves the unreasonable demand that we do without the sonic continuity of that initial intimacy. From this time on, silence transmits the alarm signal of being.” Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 20.

3. “Evoked potentials in the brain appear up to half a second before the individual is aware of a stimulus. The brain then remembers the stimulus as happening in the present moment or the immediate instant in one’s sense of time. So perception in time is an illusion.” Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer’s Sound Practice* (iUniverse, 2005), xii.


10. Perhaps adequate replacements for *original* and *copy*, for my purposes, are *installation* and *documentation*. 


14. “There is no sound pressure variation that will always lead to one and only one perception.” Stephen Handel, *Listening: An Introduction to the Perception of Auditory Events* (MIT Press, 1989).


17. “To *hear* is a verb that reveals the narrowness of our sonic perceptions and imaginations. We have no such limitation when we describe how animals move: They lope, strut, crawl, sidle, wing, creep, sashay, slide, trot, flutter, and bounce. Here is a lexicon that recognizes the diversity of animal motion. But we have an impoverished vocabulary for hearing. Hear. Listen. Attend. These words do little to open our imagination to the multiplicities of sonic experience...Hobbled by weak verbs, language must draw on adjectives, adverbs, and analogies.” Haskell, *Sounds Wild and Broken*, 18.

18. “What is needed is a vocabulary—a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary—for forms [One of the difficulties is that our idea of form is spatial (the Greek metaphors for form are all derived from notions of space). This is why we have a more ready vocabulary of forms for the spatial than the temporal arts.]” Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Penguin, 2013), 8.


20. To enter Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s shared website (https://cardiffmiller.com/, accessed March 13, 2023) one must first click away a pop-up that reads, “Most of the media on this site was recorded using binaural 3D audio, which is only effective when wearing headphones.” I know from images on the site that *The Dark Pool* is an installation with sound and that it is a room lit sparsely by various tabletop lamps. Books in stacks and opened on large desks, a typewriter, a mannequin head, sawhorses, easels, cardboard, plastic, and other materials that might be found inside an artist studio fill the space. Scattered throughout this detritus are more than a couple dozen speaker cones. I know from reading about the work that the speaker cones are motion activated and play fragments of music and vocal recordings that loosely compile a script. I know from reading interviews that Cardiff considers the work to be a realm of suspended animation, that the work was a result, partly, of reading a lot of Jorge Luis Borges, and that art making is an inexplicable activity. I know from people who have experienced the
work in person that documentation and pontificating about its origins does nothing to convey its reality. Do I know the work at all?

21. “We wanted The Dark Pool to be a place where meaning is never constant, where one reality would blur into another.” Janet Cardiff, “untitled statement,” in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Janet Cardiff (P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, N.Y., 2002).

22. “In the Babel of information, knowledge is potentially infinite, yet memory is fully determined.” Catherine Crowston, The Dark Pool, Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff, Alberta, 1995, brochure.


24. Bright Eyes, “Bowl of Oranges,” in Lifted, or the Story Is in the Soil, Keep Your Ear to the Ground (Saddle Creek, 2002).

25. “Giving up Beethoven, the emotional climaxes and all, is fairly simple for an American. But giving up Bach is more difficult. Bach's music suggests order and glorifies for those who hear it their regard for order, which in their lives is expressed by daily jobs nine to five and the appliances with which they surround themselves and which, when plugged in, God willing, work. Some people say that art should be an instance of order so that it will save them momentarily from the chaos that they know is just around the corner. Jazz is equivalent to Bach (steady beat, dependable motor), and the love of Bach is generally coupled with the love of jazz. Jazz is more seductive, less moralistic than Bach. It popularizes the pleasures and pains of the physical life, whereas Bach is close to church and all that. Knowing as we do that so many jazz musicians stay up to all hours and even take dope, we permit ourselves to become, sympathetically at least, junkies and night owls ourselves: by participation mystique. Giving up Bach, jazz, and order is difficult. Patsy Davenport is right. It's a very serious question. For if we do it - give them up, that is - what do we have left?” John Cage, “Indeterminacy,” in Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 262–3.


27. “For instance, during WWII, being still interested in my conception of beauty, and being interested therefore in concentrating my attention and my listeners’ attentions on the beautiful, it struck me that beauty had gone out of all things large and big in society and was confined to those in love and those in friendship. And yet, when seeing love disappear, I wrote a piece called ‘A Perilous Night,’ speaking in it of things that one might associate with anguish, I found people hearing this music in terms of a woodpecker in a church belfry. It struck me that even though I was doing my best to speak in my music, I was not being understood. So, I began to question whether I should go on writing music in a society where people going in many different directions, speaking many different languages, were in, I thought, a tower of babel situation.” John Cage, “John Cage Interviewed by John Cott (1963),” The House of Hidden Knowledge, July 29, 2017, YouTube video, https://youtu.be/SLmkFKTpRO8 , accessed March 14, 2023.


30. Haskell, Sounds Wild and Broken, 18.


35. “When we discuss explaining contemporary art to the public we must, I feel, first ask ourselves what is our purpose for doing so. As people drawn to the field of art, it is, most fundamentally, the basic human characteristic of wanting to share and give others an experience that has been profound and important in our own lives. If it is our desire to perpetuate our own experience of personal meaning and transformation, then the question becomes, how do you start the fire in the individual? You can't just reach in there and strike a match they must do it themselves. The fire, once ignited, will grow to consume all the necessary fuel in its path, a process we call ‘an individual educating themselves.’” Bill Viola, Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973–1994 (National Geographic Books, 1995), 171-2.

36. “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.” Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” 47.


40. While they may not necessarily disagree, Jonathan Sterne wants to deconstruct reproduction, to jettison ideologies that have produced misnomers such as “original” and “copy,” and Bill Viola is concerned with a synthesized understanding of affect. It is not difficult to understand that affect changes between installation and documentation—let us avoid using “original” and “copy”—because they are different realities altogether. The process of creation via documentation requires a splintering of media, image, sound, etc…and a subsequent recombination. What traditional documentation lacks when compared to installation is any connection to the remaining sensorial faculties such as smell, touch, and taste.


42. Excerpt of a memo from the Mildred Lane Kemper Museum to Sam Fox MFA candidates.

44. “Another frustration that comes is people often ask me to be in exhibitions but say, you know, we’ll put you on headphones, and for me, you need the physicality of the sound in the space.” Stephen Vitiello, “Stephen Vitiello: Intimate Listening,” PopTech, January 6, 2011, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTzmJRg8Yyo.

45. “Planned gifts ensure that Washington University will continue to transform lives for generations to come. Our team can help you and your advisors structure a gift strategy tailored to your financial and philanthropic goals.” “Planned Giving,” Washington University, accessed April 27, 2023, https://giving.wustl.edu/giving-opportunities/planned-giving/.

46. “When Tommy Flanagan was given a copy of Coltrane’s original *Giant Steps* to practice, the pianist thought that it was a ballad…When it was time to record *Giant Steps*, Flanagan was shocked when Coltrane counted it off at a rapid tempo. [Flanagan] did his best but gave up near the end of his solo, switching to just stating the chords until the saxophonist jumped back in.” Scott Yanow, *John Coltrane: Giant Steps*, Mosaic Records Online, accessed April 23, 2023, https://www.mosaicrecords.com/john-coltrane-giant-steps/.

47. “Meditation is generally considered a benevolent state of deep focus and engagement, in contrast to daydreaming, which is tainted by a connection to laziness, escapism, and avoidance. Applied to artwork, a meditative response suggests a continuing focus upon the work, while daydreaming suggests the work is quickly left behind as the mind wanders to other, presumably less lofty things…Meditation is increasingly appropriated into individualistic privileges of being able to escape through self-improvement, much like yoga and spa vacations, and correlating with art being good for us.” deSouza, *How Art Can Be Thought*, 198-9.


49. Rushkoff, “Interview with Jeff Emmett.”


51. Monika Weiss, comment on thesis text draft, April 26, 2023, never edited.

52. “I left UCSD in 1981 and moved to Upstate New York. I was attracted by the rich variety of musical activity in the Hudson Valley and the diversity of traditional meditation practices available. I studied Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, Yoga and Taoist forms from accomplished teachers. These studies deepened my understanding and appreciation for meditation and confirmed my own practice as a composer and improviser.” Oliveros, *Deep Listening*, xviii.

53. “I led my first Deep Listening Retreat in 1991 at the Rose Mountain Retreat Center in Las Vegas, New Mexico, at the invitation of Andy and Heloise Gold. This retreat took place in a lovely mountain area at eight thousand feet above sea level. The Center is in a relatively
unspoiled location with very little technological sound intrusion except for occasional jet airliners. There is no local traffic. The location was inspiring for listening. I committed myself to ten years of retreats at Rose Mountain and developed the forms of practice that are described in this book. Each Retreat lasts for one week and proposes listening for twenty-four hours a day.” Oliveros, *Deep Listening*, xviii.

54. “When I first started moving from being a musician to being an installation artist, one of the first things I realized was that we listen very consciously at times with our ears but we also hear and listen with our bodies. We feel physical vibration through surfaces as sound vibrates through a space, and it activates emotions immediately, and it also activates imagination.” Vitiello, “Stephen Vitiello, Intimate Listening.”

55. “Who are we? We are the life force power of the universe. With manual dexterity and two cognitive minds. We have the power to choose moment by moment who and how we want to be in the world. Right here, right now, I can step into the consciousness of my right hemisphere, where we are, I am, the life force power of the universe. The life force power of the fifty trillion molecular geniuses that make up my form. At one with all that is. Or, I can choose to step into the consciousness of my left hemisphere, where I become a single individual, a solid, separate from the flow, separate from you. I am Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, intellectual, neuroanatomist. These are the we inside of me.” Jill Bolte Taylor, “My Stroke of Insight,” TEDTalk, March 13, 2008, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UyyjU8fzEYU.

56. Monika Weiss, comment on thesis text draft, April 26, 2023, never edited.

57. Oliveros, *Deep Listening*, xxv.


----. *I’m Wide Awake, It’s Morning*. Saddle Creek, 2005.

----. *Lifted, or the Story Is in the Soil, Keep Your Ear to the Ground*. Saddle Creek, 2002.


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