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Obsolescent media, technology, and time in William Basinski's experimental sound art

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Abstract

As one of the most singular sound artists on the American scene since the early 1980s, William Basinski has created a defiant approach to sound that has helped configure new aesthetics of listening. His compositions, if that is the proper term, are primarily created by registering, cutting, assembling, and looping melodies recorded on old tapes. This text examines two of Basinski's most intriguing works: *The Disintegration Loops* (2002) and *On Time Out of Time* (2019). Both pieces explore notions of time, obsolescence, and technology through highly experimental creative strategies. The first of these works emerged unexpectedly while, in an attempt to digitalize the content of old tapes, their magnetic material cracked and flaked off, causing the sound to slowly collapse. The second was commissioned by Caltech and MIT's Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (LIGO) and transforms sound waves generated by the collision of two black holes that occurred 1.3 billion years ago. Thus, this text underlines how the artist's work is intertwined with an active investigation of sonic recording tools and temporality. Ultimately, Basinski's oeuvre proves that dying media and new technologies can merge to produce intricate, emotional, and visionary artworks that question the limits of our understanding of sound and how it is experienced.

Keywords

William Basinski; experimental sound; technology; obsolescence; time

*Medios obsoletos, tecnología y tiempo en el arte sonoro experimental de William Basinski***Resumen**

Como uno de los artistas sonoros más singulares de la escena estadounidense, William Basinski ha mantenido desde principios de la década de 1980 una desafiante aproximación al sonido que ha contribuido a configurar nuevas estéticas de la escucha. Sus composiciones, si ese es el término adecuado, son creadas principalmente mediante el registro, corte, ensamblaje y repetición en bucle de melodías grabadas en cintas antiguas. Este texto examina dos de las obras más intrigantes de Basinski: *The Disintegration Loops* (2002) y *On Time Out of Time* (2019). Ambas piezas exploran las nociones de tiempo, obsolescencia y tecnología a través de estrategias creativas altamente experimentales. El primero de estos trabajos surgió inesperadamente, cuando, al intentar digitalizar el contenido de las viejas cintas, su material magnético se resquebrajó y se desprendió, lo que causó que el sonido muriese lentamente. El segundo fue encargado por el Observatorio de Detección de Ondas Gravitatorias (LIGO, por sus siglas en inglés; operado por el Instituto de Tecnología de California y el Instituto Tecnológico de Massachusetts), y transforma las ondas de sonido generadas por la colisión de dos agujeros negros que se produjo hace 1,3 billones de años. Así, este texto señala cómo la obra del artista se imbrica en una investigación activa sobre las herramientas de grabación sonora y la temporalidad. En última instancia, los trabajos de Basinski demuestran que los medios obsoletos y las nuevas tecnologías pueden fusionarse para producir obras de arte intrincadas, emotivas y visionarias que cuestionan los límites de nuestra comprensión del sonido y su experiencia.

Palabras clave

William Basinski; sonido experimental; tecnología; obsolescencia; tiempo

Introduction. Beyond music: rendering sound

Art no longer engages exclusively with sight and visibility. Since the 1960s, other perceptual regimes have played important roles in the production and reception of art. And sound, as Caleb Kelly argues, has become immanent in contemporary art: "Every audience member is continually processing information gathered through the sense of hearing" (2011, 14). The public interprets artwork not only with their eyes but also their ears as receptors, since we cannot simply close our ears. This realization has allowed for the exploration of interactive possibilities and new, holistic modes of experiencing and engaging with art. For instance, video artist Bill Viola questions the parallelism between the eye-camera and the ear-microphone binomials, claiming that all senses exist concurrently in our bodies, intertwined in a single system comprising sensory data, neural processing, imagination, memory, and several other factors related to the event or art manifestation with which we are engaging (1995, 48).

Consequently, new artistic sonic environments have reconfigured categories such as dissonance and noise: the line between sound and musical sound is now blurred (Kahn 1993, 103). Positively, this shift in creative practices and auditory perception was, to a great extent, catalyzed by artists and pioneers such as Luigi Russolo – who conceptualized the notion of "musical noise" caused by machinery and industrialization (1967, 4) – and John Cage, who in 1937 argued that the use of noise to make music would increase until we reached music produced with the aid of electronic instruments (1961, 2).

Due to all of the above, and according to artist Dan Lander, the terms "experimental music" and "sound art" are interchangeable due to their imbricate historical attachment (1990, 10). The assumption that all sounds uttered are or can be music led artists to incorporate noises from everyday life into their new non-referential compositions. Walt Whitman's 1858 "Song of Myself" reads as a premonition of new sensitivities to be explored in the next century rather than a carefree, joyous poem: "I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen, / And accrue what I hear into myself. . . and let sounds contribute toward me. / (...) I hear all sounds as they are tuned to their uses. . . sounds of the city and sounds out of the city. . . sounds of the day and night" (Miller 1989, 19). Similarly, only three decades later, Henry David Thoreau defended in his diaries the potential musicality of unusual sounds in the following terms:

"The commonest and cheapest sounds, as the barking of a dog, produce the same effect on fresh and healthy ears that the rarest music does. It depends on your appetite for sound. (...) I have lain awake at night many a time to think of the barking of a dog which I had heard long before, bathing my being again in those waves of sound, as a frequenter of the opera might lie awake remembering the music he had heard" (1888, 41).

Such purposes described by both American writers: a focus on listening – to all kinds of sound sources – seem to be William Basinski's starting point for creating his experimental art. In the late 70s, the Houston-born composer moved to San Francisco and started recording any sound debris he could identify, from relentless traffic noise to random radio broadcasts:

"I would run these machines all night and record them as I worked. Then I'd record the sound of the old refrigerator in the house, playing with both recordings and various speeds on the tape decks. I was a mad scientist. I wanted to be a composer but I didn't think of myself as one. All my friends were painters, so I saw myself as painting with sound" (Bäcker 2015).

This sound library, recorded with analogue tools, has become Basinski's preferred creative material. Certainly, his composition process – which includes cumulating, cutting, and stitching together pieces of reel-to-reel tape decks – is closer to collage painting or sculpture than to classical arrangement of sound. In fact, according to his bio – published on various virtual portals and streaming platforms – William Basinski presents himself as a "sound sculptor".¹ Indeed, there is something sculptor-like about his intimacy with plastic loops, glue, and iron dust, which is "more attuned to the transient truth of the medium than the immortal dream of recorded sound" (Howe 2020).

Recently, the notion of sound art – and the many subcategories of the movement – has become a somewhat commonplace category in which almost any recording, composition, or performance can be classified. In an attempt to clarify the term, composer and musicologist Alan Licht explains that:

"Unlike music, which has a fixed time duration (usually calculated around a concert programme length, or more recently the storage capacity of LP, tape, or compact disc formats), a sound art piece, like a visual artwork, has no specified timeline; it can be experienced over a long or short period of time, without missing the beginning, middle or end" (2009, 3).

This is true for Basinski's iterative sound pieces, often over an hour long and articulated by shorter, indiscernible fragments of melodies looped ad infinitum. The non-linear structure of his works evokes other forms of temporality linked to ideas of eternity and circularity. Therefore, duration and repetition are key elements in such artwork, and they induce contradictory bodily sensations: on one hand, it leads to exhaustion and, on the other, it allows for enhanced awareness or attentiveness. Section 2.1 will explore these aspects further.

Despite being an academically trained musician – he studied composition at North Texas State and is a professional clarinetist and saxophonist – over the past forty years, Basinski has created an experimental body of work that explores the ephemeral nature of sound, questioning time and the boundaries of recording media. This text will address the artist's arguably most emblematic piece, *The Disintegra-*

1. <https://music.apple.com/ca/artist/william-basinski/14942177>

tion Loops, and one of his most recent works, *On Time Out of Time*. Both projects relate to temporality, technology, and the experience of sound in distinctly innovative, thought-provoking ways.

1. When sound dies: *The Disintegration Loops* (2002)

1.1. A discovery, not a composition

For artist Brandon Labelle, the practice of Sound Art harnesses and examines the features of sound and the processes by which it operates: “it binds and unhinges, harmonizes and traumatizes; (...). It seemingly eludes definition, while having profound effect...” (2006, IX).

The Disintegration Loops, conceived during the summer of 2001 and presented in 2002, meets the parameters established by Labelle, for it is a process-driven, emotional piece that interrogates and pushes the limits of the medium's own materiality and durability. Probably Basinski's most demanding and complex proposal, the project began when the artist attempted to digitalize his collection of ambient music fragments, recorded in the early 1980s. As Basinski ran the tape loops through his recording device, he found that the magnetic tape began to fall apart. At first scared, then thrilled with the result, he repeated the process to pursue this effect of sound melting into a series of six long durational pieces. The artist recalls the moment of discovery as follows:

“I came across these big cases back in the storage room – The Land That Time Forgot, we used to call it – and I found all my old tape loops. By then I had a CD burner, and knowing what happens to old tapes, I started to archive the loops to digital. In the summer of 2001, in late July or August, I pulled this one loop out that I didn't remember at all, and put it on the machine [...] and I turned on the recorder and started recording. After about 15 minutes, I realized something was changing– and I looked, and I could see dust in the tape path on the ReVox that was playing the tape loop. I sat there watching the recorder, monitoring it as this thing over the length of a CD-R completely disintegrated in the most profoundly beautiful way. The sustains sort of fell away, and yet somehow the core of it stayed – the attack and the basic rhythm of the melody – hanging on desperately until the very end. I put the next one on, and it started doing it too. And that's when I realized I didn't need any counter melodies there; I just need to concentrate on what's happening and stay out of the way and make sure the recorder is on” (Friedlander 2012).

In these analogue cassette tapes, sound information is stored on metal affixed to a magnetic ribbon (Figure 1). As they crumbled during digitalization, audio dropouts and syncope appeared, which created the distinctive, piercing sonic atmosphere of the works. Sound became dust. To listen to *The Disintegration Loops* is to witness the end of the dominance of analogue sound. The work also raises a poignant oxymoron, for it can now be played on an endless virtual loop, but at the cost

of destroying the original analogue source, which linked the work to the conventions and formulas of deconstructivism. Basinski's decision to “stay out of the way” can be read as a pivotal creative strategy, since it allowed him to abandon the role of composer and adopt the role of supervisor, interfering as little as possible.



Figure 1. Basinski manipulating old tapes from his archive to create sound loops

Source: frame from the documentary *Other Music* (2019), directed by Puloma Basu and Rob Hatch-Miller

The use of tape loops began in the 1940s, when avant-garde musicologist Pierre Schaeffer started to experiment with post-war technologies. Minimal composer Steve Reich (who Basinski reveres as one of his most influential sources, together with Brian Eno and John Cage) has also contributed to the expansion of the sonic possibilities of these analogue tools. What makes the sound of tape loops so unique is that they create rhythmical patterns densified by unceasing repetition. In an undated statement by Yves Klein on his *Monotone Symphony*, the artist of the immaterial blue wrote: “Around 1947-48 I created a ‘monotone’ symphony (...). This symphony lasts for forty minutes and consists of one single, continuous, long drawn out ‘sound’; it has neither beginning nor end, which creates a dizzy feeling, a sense of aspiration, of a sensibility outside and beyond time” (Klein 1974, 17). Although Klein's was not a looped sound registered on tape but an actual held note played live, there is a shared sense of insistence and infinitude in Basinski's work, which also seems to exist outside of time – or at least unfolds in its own temporal dimension. Chris Vanderloo, co-owner of radical Brooklyn record store *Other Music*, stressed how the piece “uncannily transcends time as the loops swell and fray into seeming infinity” (*Other Music*, 2012).

The Disintegration Loops is composed of nine pieces: *dlp 1.1*, *dlp 2.1*, *dlp 2.2*, *dlp 3*, *dlp 4*, *dlp 5*, *dlp 6*, *dlp 1.2*, and *dlp 1.3*. They are presented in that order, the same they came off the stand, grouped into four volumes. The total duration of the work is 5 hours, 53 minutes, and 38 seconds. Surprisingly, however, their actual sound is created with quite brief loops: the longest is around 15 inches, and the shortest is just around 6, which translates into a brief period of time. Basinski pushes the potential of only a few seconds of sonic textures and melodies to their limit, to the point of the actual destruction of the materials, in order to evoke perpetuity:

"That's what I used to do. When I thought a loop was successful, it was the kind of thing you could put on for hours... I liked when the loops were seamless, when you couldn't hear a beginning or an end. It really just became this eternal thing. The reason I'd made my pieces so long, where I'd use the whole side of a cassette or something, is because they were meant to last forever" (Parks 2012).

When asked about the description of the "perfect loop", Basinski insists on this undiscernible, never-ending sonic flowing: "For me, it's one that... you don't hear a beginning or an end, or if you do, it resolves itself into the beginning perfectly, and then it just flows. So, you're creating a kind of a vortex or a stargate – an escape hatch, if you will" (Habib & Brady-Savignac 2019). As a durational work based on *boucles* of sounds, *The Disintegration Loops* are articulated through continuity and repetition, but from their infinite, iterative structure also emanates an agonic variation: the sound reprises and simultaneously changes as it dissolves with every turn of the reel. This fact further enhances the already eerie quality of the piece.

Twenty years after its release, the artist's perception of the work remains unchanged: "It is what it is, like a force of nature. It's something I discovered, not something I composed, so I find it mesmerizing still" (Friedlander 2012).

1.2. A hymn of decay, an elegy

In 2001, William Basinski had been operating on the art-music scene of peripheral New York for over two decades. Together with his partner, artist James Elaine, Basinski had built a big studio, named Arcadia, on his roof loft in Williamsburg, which soon became something of a mecca for the city's emerging artists. By way of illustration, Jeff Buckley's cover of his album *Grace* was shot in the loft's living room. Yet, rather unknown outside of these underground circuits and overwhelmed with a \$30,000 debt, Basinski felt frustrated by his work not being understood. Around July of that year, however, the artist would put together the pieces that eventually launched his career:

"I was close to getting evicted then, so I was really stressed out about it. So anyway, (...) I decided to continue archiving these loops. I put the first loop in line on, and it was *Disintegration Loop 1.1*. I was blown away at how beautiful, grave, and stately this melody was. I didn't even remember [making] it. (...) I continued on from there with the next loop and another counter melody. (...) So, over the rest of that day and the next day, the whole thing – all six loops – had done their thing. (...) I spent the next two months just thinking about the life and death of each individual loop. It was as if they were redeemed in a way. It had a very profound effect on me, then I just listened and listened and listened" (Parks 2012).

Later that summer, the work would come to completion. On September 11, Basinski climbed to the roof of his loft to discover huge columns of smoke billowing from lower Manhattan. Downstairs, he played *The Disintegration Loops* as the world around him seemed to collapse,

just like the music, and stared at the chaos. Something clicked. As the tragic day ended, Basinski videotaped the burning landscape into the night (Figure 2). The artist depicts the work's deep connection to that event and how it became a sort of memorial piece:

"I guess it was a decision I made, on 9/11, to try to capture the last hour of daylight on video. My friend Peggy had her camera on [my] roof, and we had been up there all day listening to music and staring in shock downtown (...). So, I picked up a videotape, and she helped me frame it up. I turned it on, and I said, just let it run out. And it ended up capturing the last hour of daylight looking downtown at the smoke. The next morning when I looked at it, I put on *Disintegration Loop 1.1* and just sat there and lined it up, and it was just so moving; I knew it was an elegy" (Friedlander 2012).

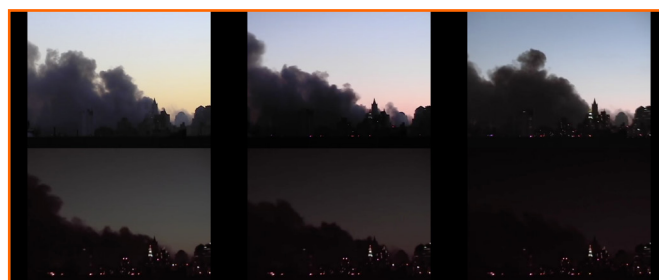


Figure 2. William Basinski, *dip. 1.1*, 2001

Source: frames from the video accompanying the work

The mournful decay of the sound in *The Disintegration Loops* somberly resonates with the sense of loss and grief linked to 9/11. The fourth loop, for instance, is so damaged that its second half is almost entirely solitary cracks and out-of-range noise suffocating the original melody. Some associate this piece to despair, loneliness, or end times. Other pieces, such as *dip. 1* or *dip. 5*, evoke signs of hope or triumphant resilience. Elaine finds that the raw emotional collective state induced by the horror of the event led Basinski's work to be appreciated and *The Disintegration Loops* to be held up as funeral hymns: "September 11 gave people a keyhole . . . a way to understand his music. It was catastrophic beyond imagination, not just physically but to our psyche. It affected everyone's lives. That opened up possibilities for people to stop and listen" (Beta 2021).

At once an intoxicating and restorative balm, the work acts as a meditation on mortality and life, destruction and survival. In an accompanying text to the box edition of the piece released on its tenth anniversary, Basinski wrote about its unescapable nexus to decay. The material disintegration of the iron oxide particles left bare plastic spots on the tape, causing silence in the corresponding sections:

"The music was dying. I was recording the death of this sweeping melody. It was very emotional for me, and mystical as well. Tied up in these melodies were my youth, my paradise lost, the American Pastoral Landscape, all dying gently, gracefully, beautifully. Life and Death were being recorded here as a whole: death as simply a part of

life; a cosmic change, a transformation. When the disintegration was complete, the body was simply a little strip of clear plastic with a few clinging chords, the music had turned to dust and was scattered along the tape path in little piles and clumps. Yet the essence and memory of life and death of this music had been saved: recorded to a new media, remembered" (Basinski 2012, n.p.).

1.3. The endless loop: back to orchestra



Figure 3: William Basinski, *dlp. 1.1*, 2001. First presentation format of the work
Source: frame from the documentary *Other Music* (2019), directed by Puloma Basu and Rob Hatch-Miller

The four volumes that sustain *The Disintegration Loops* were individually released in 2002 and 2003 to the immediate praise of avant-garde art and culture circles. The presentation and distribution format of the work – a formally succinct CD packaged in a plastic sleeve – (Figure 3, however, contributed to its visual component being disregarded). Only in 2012 was the artwork relaunched as a box set containing a DVD with the video record of Manhattan's damaged skyline made by Basinski as the day drew to a close. In this regard, other exhibitions of the artwork, for example its permanent installation at the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, allow for a better understanding of it, as it is shown in tandem with the video and other memorabilia. According to Lindsay Balfour, "*The Disintegration Loops* is unlike any other installation in the Museum, not only for its experimental and avant-garde aesthetic but in the way that it is framed within a historical narrative that is propelled primarily by commemorative anecdotes, time stamps, tangible artifacts, and eyewitness and news accounts" (2018, n.p.). Consequently, in the context of the museum, the work acts both as digital sound and a visual landscape that can be regarded as a sound installation, requiem music, and documental piece.

Certainly, all the incarnations of the work are valid, from digital listening through online streaming services to more immersive proposals,

such as the one at the 9/11 Memorial and Museum. As Paul Hegarty points out, sonic art manifestations take on many forms: "sound installations, performances, recordings, whether for direct public consumption or as purchasable objects to listen to domestically, interactive pieces, pieces designed for headphone use, transmission of sound (often from other locations). Each one of these has many variants" (2007, 170).

Of all the piece's lives, nonetheless, few stand out more than its live incarnation: the *Disintegration Loops* has been orchestrated on a few special occasions. Commissioned as part of "Remembering September 11", an event marked on the 10th anniversary of the disaster, the first of the loops, *dlp. 1.1*, was performed live by the Wordless Music Orchestra in the Temple of Dendur, in the Sackler Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of art. About the orchestration of the work, Basinski himself has expressed how it had always been a dream of his. Surely, this reinterpretation adds new layers of meaning and complexity to the records. Each new performance of the piece brings nuances and changes, be it in total duration (the arrangement of *dlp. 1.1* by Maxim Moston is only 38 minutes and 42 seconds long: almost half the length of the original), emotional impact (some argue that the live incarnations of the work are somehow more cheerful), or the rhythm and speed of the melody, as pointed out by the artist:

"I can't perform *The Disintegration Loops*. [waves an invisible piece of tape] They're gone. So it's going to be different every time, because each conductor makes it theirs. For example, we did it last year with the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra, and we had this great Belarusan [*sic*] conductor, and he took it *really slow*" (Yoo 2019).

In this return of the sound to the analogue realm, French horns play the melody and percussionists crinkle cling wrap to emulate the noise of the tape. There are no electronics. The original sound of the piece, which was also orchestral, was recorded from radio to tape, from tape to digital, and then back to orchestra – a poetic, ironic loop in itself.

2. *On Time Out of Time* (2019): 1.3 billion-year-old experimental sound

2.1. Hearing time

In 1969, Bruce Nauman imagined *Untitled*: a conceptual piece for the Art in the Mind exhibition at the Allen Memorial Museum. The work reads: "Drill a hole about a mile into the earth and drop a microphone to within a few feet of the bottom. Mount the amplifier and speaker in a very large empty room and adjust the volume to make audible any sounds that may come from the cavity" (Kelly 2011, 186). Basinski's *On Time Out of Time* emerges from the opposite premise: it is created by

bringing back sounds not from within the earth but from outer space. In this regard, the piece *Echoes of the Moon* (1987) by Pauline Oliveros comes as a singular antecedent in extra-terrestrial compositions. On it, the American artist launched signals and sounds to the moon with devices that registered their delayed comeback, opening space for different temporalities and a different specialty in the experience of sound. With her musical and philosophical work, Oliveros proposed the concept of *Deep Listening*, which advocates for attentive hearing in our overstimulating, distracting world – just like Basinski's oeuvre does.

The title *On Time Out of Time* underlines the artist's interest in the temporal dimension of sound, which to a great extent has configured his creative language. When attempting to address the concept of time, Basinski acknowledges its enigmatic, ungraspable nature: "It's elusive. It speeds up, it slows down. I don't know" (Indiana 2020). But the obsession with this notion has been made explicit in previously released works, such as *A Shadow in Time* (2017), or suggested as a metaphor for the flowing in *Cascade* (2015), *The River* (2007), or *Watermusic I* (2001).

In conversation with artist and critic Brian O'Doherty, composer Morton Feldman² stressed that his obsession was with the sonic surface, declaring that his were, in reality, no "compositions" at all: "One might call them time canvases in which I more or less prime the canvas with an overall hue of the music...I prefer to think of my work as between categories. Between time and space. Between painting and music. Between the music's construction, and its surface" (Licht 2007, 210). In addition to paralleling Feldman's ideas on "no composing" and producing "sound painting", Basinski's work can also be read as a "time canvas", for most of his pieces place temporality and duration as the cornerstones of sound. However, in this recent work, Basinski goes further back in time and in the use of recording technology than ever before. A collaboration with science artists Evelina Domnitch and Dmitry Gelfand, who work for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the California Institute of Technology's Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory, part of the material included in *On Time Out of Time* was originally conceived for the art installations *Orbihedron* and *ER=EPR*, exhibited in Limits of Knowing at Berlin's Martin-Gropius-Bau in 2017.

The 2019 album by Basinski is mainly informed by the collision of two black holes captured by LIGO's interferometers. The sonic decay on *The Disintegration Loops* was caused by two decades of deterioration of the original tapes, but in *Time out of Time*, the centerpiece sound – this merging of massive blackholes and the resultant gravitational waves that reverberated across the universe – is 1.3 billion years old. Certainly, the term "sound" is perhaps misstated: what presented in the record is actually light signals converted into sound waves, for sound cannot travel in space. Quivering high-frequency noises emerge and vanish back out of range throughout the piece, while night drone vibrations are interwoven with the warmth of the static crackle. Possibly one

of the artist's most somber and mysterious works, the volume comprises 8 recordings. Although the first seven are fragments of a single piece, individually none exceed ten minutes in length – which comes as a surprise, since Basinski is known for his long audio tracks. The 39-minute volume has been praised for extracting a sense of intimacy and temporal dilation from such a spectral sonic material:

"There's nothing inherently warm about the signals that LIGO picked up. Considered separately, most of the sounds here convey all the chilly eeriness of the void of deep space. It's a buzz that brings to mind inhuman things: microwaves, quasars, the fluorescent lights at Office Depot. But Basinski weaves these transmissions into something far more evocative. (...) Time seems to disappear from consideration" (Beta, 2019).

The artist is no stranger to space recordings, even though the cosmic sound on this one is astonishing old. Growing up in Houston, his own childhood was linked to this field of study, as his father worked for NASA in the 1970s. Neither is the artist a stranger to time stretching through experiencing sound, as already implied. In fact, Basinski's central sonic element, the loop, contradicts linearity of time, suggesting the idea of circularity as well as notions of eternity and expansion. Drone sounds, for their part, seem to exclude measured time, as they form an auditory flat zone that induces sonic contemplation: "Either you lose yourself in it or you experience every second individually as the relentless repetition of individuated moments (...). Once you reach a continuous plateau of perception, time melts away" (FT 2019). Hence, in Basinski's work, loops –eternal present– and drones –hypnotic presence– combine to render and display time on a sensorial, experiential level. Ultimately, the artist proposes sound as a place of solace, introspection: "I can create a different resonant frequency, taking people out of time for a minute" (Beaumont-Thomas 2019).

This affirmation is particularly striking, as the work *On Time Out of Time* was released only a few months before the COVID-19 emergency began in China. And although the piece was obviously not composed about this crisis, it is interesting to speculate on its reception in the context of the pandemic. During lockdown, many ambient sound albums and playlists were advertised to help people stay sane while spending time indoors. Basinski's work appeared here and there as people dealt with tragedy and felt the need to be "taken out of time for a minute", to put it in the words of the artist himself. The complex social and political framework in which *On Time Out of Time* and the following album, significantly titled *Lamentations* (2020), should not be overlooked. Their reception proves that people continue to feel embraced in these sonic spaces of encomium and renewal, just as with *The Disintegration Loops* after 9/11. In the face of fear, powerlessness and loss, the work of Basinski offers some sort of comfort: a boost to resilience.

2. Feldman was himself greatly influenced by the New York School painters, which included Philip Guston, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and front-runner Mark Rothko, to whose chapel in Houston the arranger dedicated a suite of compositions.

2.2. Further back into the future

Having been performed live on several occasions after its release in 2019, *On Time Out of Time* has grown and expanded in terms of installation. When it was initially commissioned by science artists Domnitch and Gelfand, there was a visual counterpart to the original aural experience. As a result, *On Time Out of Time*, usually performed in churches and museum spaces, has become a multimedia artwork in which light and projections play a leading role in enriching the sonic narrative (Figure 4).



Figure 4: William Basinski performing *On Time Out of Time* at St George's Episcopal Church, New York, with site-mapped lighting designed by video engineers Eric Epstein and Martin Tzonev

Source: photograph by Greg Cristmann

Basinski depicts *On Time Out of Time* as a love story between two black holes, although he admits that the sound of their collapse encompasses a minor part of the record's palette. "I didn't use all of it because some of it was really scary, and then I extrapolated with my imagination, how these waves traveled [*sic*] billions of years to come to earth", Basinski admits (Bromfield 2019). At first, the artist was reluctant to make sonic arrangements and adjustments that could alter the original sonic source. His first approach to LIGO's material was tentative, as he sought to "stick to science", he says, but when he was incited to experiment more with it, the artist recalls how he "[r]eally dug into it until it started to breathe, did all sorts of things, and found a way to have it...just imagining these waves traveling throughout galaxies and coming towards Earth, and life..." (Habib & Brady-Savignac, 2019 n.p.). Thus, for *On Time Out of Time*, the artist collects and transforms cracks, hisses, echoes, blurring and dissonances – all these elemental features that constitute sound.

Basinski scrutinizes the complex relationship between these elements and our regimes of perception via technology – be it high-level space tools like those provided by LIGO's for *On Time Out of Time*, or now obsolete, dying media such as cassettes and magnetic tape, like

those employed in *The Disintegration Loops*. However, when Basinski started working with the latter in the late 70s, these were not considered obsolete. On how his relationship with technology has evolved in terms of sound equipment preferences, the artist defends his loyalty to analogue devices whilst keeping an open mind towards the potential of new technology:

"I still love using my analog gear. It does something that computers can't do. I use computers now for other steps. I do have some virtual synths and some other synthesizers, and things that I've had since I started. My gear is my tools, it's what I work with. I was just at Moogfest, in North Carolina,¹ and besides music, it's a big technology festival, there's lot of geeks there, buying modules and building synthesizers. They're looking at all the gear and the new Moog synths, and they let me come in and play around with the new Moog One synthesizer. Very sophisticated. (...) it was fun playing around with this new monster" (Habib and Brady-Savignac, 2019 n.p.).

In order to keep up with advances in sound tech resources, Basinski now works in his studio with Preston Wendel, a young engineer who helps the artist to set up the sound's bandwidth, rattling, and volume levels, in addition to archiving and other technical tasks.

Through this working methodology that embraces future technology without disregarding past media, in this recent piece, Basinski interrogates the death of sound from a new perspective: that of cosmic temporality.

Conclusion, or the renewal of sound through obsolescence and digital experimentation

This text has focused on two of Basinski's most complex pieces and their relation to temporality and technology. As aural works, both magnify and examine sound recording in experimental ways with implications at a technical, emotional, and conceptual level. The artist's oeuvre operates between media: aural and immersive installation, sound and sculpting or painting, analogue and digital, real time and prolonged time. His interest in examining the temporal nature of sound, we argue, has led him to articulate evocative sonic landscapes in which sound literally dies off: a meditation on transformation and the transience of all things, including life. On one hand, Basinski investigates in his practice the possibilities of sound's materiality – plastic, rust, glue, and other ephemera – that the artist employs to mimic a certain natural order of decomposition and decay. On the other, the artist inspects the aestheticization of time through his recording and processing of sound, which reverberates with the mechanisms of time itself, and the use of loops and drones. Paradoxically, from the sonic ruins of his pieces emanates a life-affirming, expansive sense: a dilated temporal plane.

Minimal yet emotional, the two works addressed in this text help amplify the boundaries of sound art, the processes and potentials of listening and sonic culture via obsolescent and new technologies, dissolving the past and future in a stimulating loop.

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