

# EAGER BEAVER

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## Drill duet

*Two drills with linear actuators and arduino program.*

Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Helicopter String Quartet* was inspired by a dream, where "string players played tremoli which blended so well with the timbres and the rhythms of the rotor blades that the helicopters sounded like musical instruments." (Stockhausen 2018) Stockhausen then went about producing this work, with the performers leaving the space where the audience was, to then be lifted into the air in helicopters and within which they would then play the composition, sent back to the audience in the form of live television.

One of my friends and I share the tendency to harmonise with electric motors. Fridges, Blenders, Bathroom fans; all of these electro-mechanical devices offer a rarely appreciated symphony of audible tones in the standard domestic domicile. The human voice offers one possible manner of introducing composition into these abstract sounds – within our own homes no less. Along these lines, Phil Niblock, New York musical minimalist, had his musical revelation while driving up a mountain on his motorbike. As he followed a truck, he received the inspiration for his later career: "Both of our throttles were very open...Soon, the revolutions of our respective engines came to a nearly harmonic coincidence. But not quite. The strong physical presence of the beats resulting from the two engines running at slightly different frequencies put me in such a trance that I nearly rode off the side of the mountain."

I am reminded in all of this of one of my heroes, Maryanne Amacher, who dedicated her life to what she called 'eartones', the production from two separate pure tones played together of a third responding tone that is not part of the audio, but rather produced from within the ear itself. Somewhat like Binaural Beats, but another psycho-or-physio-acoustic phenomenon.

Amacher used the Muse Triadex, created by famous artificial intelligence researcher Marvin Minsky to produce most of her music. This strange device is an algorithmic sequencer, that puts out game-boy like low-bit-rate music, but composed within the Triadex by a series of algorithms. Amacher is a hero of mine for her wildly speculative thinking. A favourite passage of hers is about heliography:

"One day, we'll have minds for music. Imagine, there are six listening posts where people are currently studying the sound of the sun in a project called "the Gong". In the last few decades interferometry techniques have revealed defined patterns of acoustic oscillations corresponding to a series of harmonics produced as sound waves reflect off the thermal boundaries surrounding the sun's core. Separated from us by 93 million miles of vacuum, the sun is in effect a big silent gong. In its interior, middle C (which on our earth has a wavelength of roughly four feet in air at room temperature) has a length of about one half mile. Imagine the sound."

The recordings from this project are available online, though you'll have to find them yourself.

*Drill Duet* is an attempt to come towards some of these ideas, from my own experience harmonising with mechanical instruments. These drills are ostensibly useful machines that have been removed from the realm of intended purpose and become agents of evocation – whether of terror, disgust or pleasure, it is a music proper to them.

## Toast and Renovations

*Electronic motor, television bracket, looped video*

Occasionally, very occasionally, ideas appear unbidden and without effort, practical problems do not occur, and a work of art takes shape without the intrusion of thought, or understanding, and within the space of a single day. This is one such work, that remains a mystery to me still. I am not sure what it was about toast and the renovations that were going on in my next door neighbour's bathroom that enticed me to make this work. Or why it was that I felt the resultant video should be played as end credits in the movies are – rolling slowly down the screen. These mysteries are some of the happiest. While I am sure that I could have remade this work, made it look better, used a camera that shot something more than 720p (this was a while ago now), it would have ruined something – something I barely had to touch. Vaguely awkward (I am no

actor, or even performer), but none-the-less the only work that I think it could be. These kind of things happen rarely, and they should be cherished.

I am working on another project at the moment I write this – a script –but I wrote something else in it about toasters, and I thought it was pretty funny, so I'll put it here too:

*quantities.*

*Yes, isn't it quantities that always seem to turn people on. I mean give a man a four slice toaster more than likely he'll fill it.*

*Though even with a two slice toaster, maybe that logic applies.*

*Perhaps you could just eat one slice of toast?*

*Was it easier for the toaster manufacturer to make two toaster slot toasters*

*Than it was to make a lever for each toaster slot to be activated?*

*Shouldn't we have the option to have one slice of toast?*

*Why is it that it is always only ever a two slice toaster.*

*So if we want only one slice of toast*

*we're either wasting electricity or overeating bread.*

*Oh well*

*A strange idea indeed. I'm sure it works out for both bakers and toaster makers.*

*Probably a conspiracy of some sort.*

*Maybe this will be your big break.*

*Lever per slice toasters.*

*Nobody probably wants them, do they?*

*Do you ever really want only one slice of toast?*

*But maybe you only ever want two slices*

*because that's how every toaster presents itself.*

*Doesn't toast feel better in pairs, though?*

*Look lonely alone?*

*Isn't it more excellent to have two different spreads*

*on two slices of toast*

*than to either divide your toast into two long pieces and spread each with a different condiment,*

*or alternatively to have one single slice with one single condiment on it?*

*Oh well.*

### **Niceday**

*Mechanically altered scissors with 'niceday' etched on them, electric motor and cable.*

I almost missed my flight to France. I didn't realise that 'boarding' meant boarding the plane, and that I should already be in line, as opposed to outside the terminal. Then, as I went through security they stopped me because in my bag was a possible weapon – a pair of scissors. I told them to

throw them away, hurrying to get to my plane, and they looked at me funnily and told me they couldn't open my bag and that I had to open the bag and throw them away. These had been my faithful scissors since beginning high school (a rare achievement to be sure) and I was thrown into doubt, but between the scissors and a thousand dollar plane ticket there was little choice.

One of the first things I therefore had to do overseas was to buy replacements. The scissors you see before you are this very pair, all the way from Paris, 2013. I spotted them in the office store (I do love stationery) – The store in which I also bought a favourite file that I still use to carry singularly important documents to meetings (Blue, with elastic corner straps). Their initial attraction was that they reminded me of my mother's old sewing scissors that she kept in a drawer in the kitchen in my childhood. Those intimidating scissors were bigger than this pair though, and had flaking black paint on their steel handles, and they were heavy, weighty things – like two knives. The satisfaction of their cool snip is as yet unsurpassed in all the subsequent scissors I have owned or used.

Secondarily, upon the blades of what were soon to be my new scissors, there was the small etched label: 'niceday'. I imagined the company in China who produced these scissors (well, in fact the 'de verpakkingswinkel' [*the packaging store*] company from the Netherlands) thinking that this would make a wonderful, optimistic brand label, something that would constantly wish people a 'niceday' no matter whether they were having one or not. It also exhibits a kind of grammatical subterfuge that I believe performs a parallel function to that of cuteness in animals: debilitating them. Like dogs that can barely breathe or with stunted legs – features that produce sympathy (or disgust) in us – this cropped sentence cries out for pity. Its inability to articulately wish us to 'have a nice day' causing the item itself to become the apparent manifestation of 'niceday', a sweet and cute short-cutting of the typical intelligent resistance one forms to commodities and their appeals to our search for happiness. Further, this niceday would operate over and over again, and seemed to find the fulfillment of its expression in the meeting and separation and subsequent repetition of the meeting and separation of two shearing blades. This motion also seemed to express the very action of my life.

I am obsessed with mechanical and materialist metaphors for existence, and while the force of industrialisation and the division of labour converts people into machines and automatic functions – that it depresses the spiritual and physical condition of people, and produces alienation – I nonetheless find in the machine the terrible grace of something so rigorous and repetitive that it is its own end. That they are built for purposes makes them merely more mystifying.

The motion of the machine is well known as a sexual metaphor ('When I was a young boy I loved a pumping engine, I thought it every bit as beautiful as you' [Auden]) but my favourite of these love poems to the machine is George Bataille's *Solar Anus*:

"And if the origin of things is not like the ground of the planet that seems to be the base, but like the circular movement that the planet describes around a mobile center, then a car, a clock, or a sewing machine could equally be accepted as the generative principle."

While the idea of Niceday originated long before I read this text, its words describe the principles of this artwork more eloquently than I could ever hope to do so. Or if I did, it would be a reinterpretation, and until such a time as I am proved otherwise, a misinterpretation, of words that already more than adequately express the exact thoughts that I had in conceiving of this non-monument:

"The two primary motions are rotation and sexual movement, whose combination is expressed by the locomotive's wheels and pistons. These two motions are reciprocally transformed, the one into the other."

This idea of the non-monument arises from Claes Oldenburg's scissors, that were supposed to replace the Washington Obelisk. They would move in long graceful arcs against the sky, trimming the clouds. I recently watched a documentary about Oldenburg that reminded me I should not watch art documentaries. His sculptures however, demonstrate a great example of a public art, an enlargement of the kind of standardized, simplified, industrially produced objects that proliferate in this age, and are therefore the exemplification of the true protagonists of our lives. Why all these large curvy steel sculptures when the forms that rule our

world are the images of consumer objects, aggrandised in our minds from small frail things, into Empire?

"The man who finds himself among others is irritated because he does not know why he is not one of the others. In bed next to a [man] he loves, he forgets that he does not know why he is himself instead of the body he touches."

These scissors then flew back from France, and I didn't make the same mistake I had made previously and pack them in my carry-on. They became my go-to scissors, have trimmed my hair and cut various packets of muesli open. After I acquired several other pairs of scissors these remained my favourite, until I sacrificed them to this artwork. They are my monument to persistence without success, in the face of unchanging odds ... But perhaps they are hopeful after all, in a manner. The machine, now liberated from the ardour of reproductive consumption into what George Bataille would call 'delirious expenditure', or unproductive consumption. The liberation of a utilitarian machine into this existence of purposeless excess.

### Sighing door alarm

*Raspberry Pi and program, recorded sigh of Paul Sutherland, IR beam sensors, speakers.*

My housemate, Paul, would acknowledge the presence of other people in rooms by sighing. Instead of saying hello, he would simply sigh. This is an understandable kind of acknowledgement. Why say hello every time someone you've already seen that day walks into the same room as you – especially when you're living together? The sigh, I felt, was Paul saying he was comfortable enough to relax while I was there.

The gallery I worked in for a long time had counters at each of the gallery entrances. The numbers they presented were wildly inaccurate, mostly because they counted people on the way in and out, and we never divided by two. It also counted the staff a lot as they went in and out over the course of the day. However, I believe there is a deeper problem with it – that numbers somehow indicated the success of the exhibition. There were shows hardly anyone attended that were far superior to one's it seemed the whole city turned out to see. It was a technique to try and identify and then capitalise on popularity.

I disliked the idea that every person's engagement with what was in the space was reduced to a number in our spreadsheet. I feel as if sighing is a much better response to the presence of someone in a room, just an acknowledgement, something subtle but appreciable that will put people at ease, putting all those techniques of sensing - of security and data gathering - to a better use.

Unfortunately, it was after I had finished this work that I remembered that the spaceship in Douglas Adam's *The hitchhiker's guide to the galaxy* also had sighing doorways, programmed to have a "sunny and cheerful disposition". I suppose that this artwork is made with a different sigh, but a similar idea. Perhaps there is some deeper connection between doors and sighs, that the orifice of the mouth acts like the orifice of the door, and the release of air from the mouth is an acceptance of the slight displacement of air that you will cause as you walk through the door and into the room.

**Useless machine**  
Digital Video; 11:19.

*When I consider my life, I am appalled to find it a shapeless mass. Most men like to reduce their lives to a formula, whether in boast or lament, but almost always in recrimination; their memories obligingly construct for them a clear and comprehensible past. My life has contours less firm...The landscape of my days appears to be composed, like mountainous regions, of varied materials heaped up pell-mell. There I see my nature, itself composite, made up of equal parts of instinct and training. Here and there protrude the granite peaks of the inevitable, but all about is the rubble from the landslips of chance. I strive to retrace my life to find in its some plan, following a vein of lead, or of gold, or the course of a subterranean stream, but such devices are only tricks of perspective in the memory....too many paths lead nowhere at all, and too many sums add up to nothing.*

**Marguerite Yourcenar.** *Memoirs of Hadrian.*

I sit at my computer, the cursor flashes, and I have no idea what the future holds. I once had the plan that I would write a story in which whatever I wrote the day before I would perform the day after - a sort of reverse diary. I never quite worked out all the problems with this methodology - particularly the problem with editing and proofing. What if you got the grammar wrong? Would the day following be similarly defective? Or similarly spontaneous? A trajectory is a fictive whole made up of an immense accumulation of

fragments, an incalculable number of factors. If there is something we can say about the attempts to make sense of human life, it is surely that life is not singular, but multiple and complex in nature. Never has a person been one thing, or gone only in one direction. No line is adequate to peg the cleanly laundered days of a life. As Jeanette Winterson says, 'there is no autobiography, there is only art and lies'.

Even without this reverse diary, my life has been built on the construction and interpretation of texts. It is filled with a sort of reverse snowstorm, one of black letters and numbers on white sheets of paper. It is filled to the brim with content. Small dark figures, crowded together, too far away to see clearly, too difficult to bring our attention to their peculiar nature.

I bent my last keyboard in half. Not in anger, but with a million small tiny blows that formed the several thousand words I wrote each month.

Conversely, the creation of nothing is a very difficult task. There is this temptation, always this temptation, to add something, to do something else, to move in a particular direction. More often than not I succumb to this additive directive.

I do not think I have ever managed to do nothing, but this work is as close as I have come. Now that I have been asked to write, I long for when my hands were still, and didn't press down on these worn plastic keys.

Chance is a knife that rends life in its passage, and cuts time. Yet magic is not in causality (how could it be) nor is it in direction. It is precisely the manner in which life is undirected that I most often find pleasure. In my list of 'things that excite the heart', chance is prominent. Chance is a cut, like an edit. It changes the state of things. So I sit behind my camera, and I look at things. Sometimes I catch them, like small insects in a net. Often I miss them, like I am missing a million small moments now, as I clatter away on my plastic keyboard. It is necessary to be still in order to catch time.

I sit at my computer, the cursor flashes, and I have no idea what the future holds. This is a happy story.