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Staging an Aesthetics of Presence

Liza Lim

Painting is about rendering the invisible in visible form, and music about sounding the inaudible, each the expression and exploration of the unrepresentable. Art is not the activation of the perceptions and sensations of the lived body...but about transforming the lived body into an unlivable power, an unleashed force that transforms the body along with the world.

—Elisabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*¹

When I look at my compositional projects over twenty years that have engaged with subjects as diverse as Aeschylus' Ancient Greek drama *The Oresteia*, Chinese shamanic theatre, forgotten languages that are only used in ritual or stories that "don't add up," and aspects of Aboriginal art and culture, what I see is a recurring interest in cultural patterns that are in some way about the controlled revelation and also concealment of spiritual power, of the numinous. Revelation goes hand in hand with concealment—the potential of one state is held within the other so that there is an intimate relationship between the visible and the invisible. These patterns, or what the architectural philosopher Christopher Alexander would call "pattern languages,"² work with constellations of expressive knowledge that deal in ecstatic transformation, spiritual journeying, and the uncanny.

In my formation as a composer, I have sought out cultural practices that arise from epistemological views that recognize a deep interrelationship between realms of the visible and the invisible. What attracts my attention is always the peculiar force of epiphany that can attend a "presencing." There is a phenomenon of suddenness in which invisible forces spill into an embodied visibility, a tangible erotic quality that attends these moments of intensification and resonance.

The literary scholar Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht describes this kind of immediacy of experience as a "presence effect," thereby highlighting the aspect of velocity that lies within the experience. He talks about aesthetic experience as being "an oscillation (and sometimes an interference) between 'presence effects' and 'meaning effects.'" ³

I quoted Elisabeth Grosz above, whose work strongly relies on Deleuze's thinking as well as on Darwinian theory in an analysis of art's evolutionary role as an intensification of that which is excess to survival. Together with these thinkers, she roots art "not in the creativity of mankind but rather in the superfluosity of nature, in the bird's courtship song and dance, or in the field of lilies swaying in the breeze under a blue sky."⁴ She links art and nature as structures of profusion—sensations out of chaos that

¹ Elisabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 22.

² Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, Murray Silverstein with Max Jacobson, Ingrid Fiksdahl-King, Shlomo Angel, *A Pattern Language* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1977).

³ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Production of Presence (what meaning cannot convey)* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 2.

⁴ Grosz, p. 10.

go way beyond what is minimally needed for life to exist and which transform those forces of chaos, making them available to us in new ways.

The opera composer/theatre person in me reads Grosz' statement about "rendering the invisible in visible form" as a series of stage directions. Something concealed is revealed; a curtain parts, a veil is suddenly lifted and in that lifting one also becomes aware of the frame, the stage. Through this framing, one begins to see divisions, patterns, and provisional orderings of the world. A play takes place: a play of raw forces in which the actors are invisible forces like time, gravity, magnetism—things which we can't grasp directly but which act on us, in us, through us. These unpredictable forces become perceptible to us through sensations of the body, through material qualities, through resonances, which offer not a representation of self (these cosmic forces are utterly non-human), but something at a more vital and primordial level—an intensification of being.

Shimmer: an aesthetics of transition

Whilst my compositions from ten years ago were informed by explorations of Chinese poetry and ritual culture, my most recent work has focused on aspects of Australian Aboriginal art that embody a worldview informed by multivalent understandings of temporality.

Very briefly, in Aboriginal culture, ancestral time, or to use the popular term, "Dreamtime," is an originary force of creation that underlies all things and can be *presenced* in all times, mythical, historical, and contemporary. According to Howard Morphy, "the Dreamtime has never ceased to exist, and from the viewpoint of the present it is as much a feature of the future as it is of the past."⁵ The temporal structure of this worldview, in my mind, gives it a much more unstable, fluctuating quality than the Chinese knowledge system. In looking at Aboriginal culture, I have focused particularly on this quality of fluctuation or shimmer.

Shimmer, an effect of flickering light or a pulsing aural quality, has an absolutely central value across Australian Aboriginal cultures as an indicator of the presence of a spiritual reality. The aesthetic quality of shimmer (whether found on a canvas painting, a body painting or the beating of clapsticks) is associated with the creative transformation of matter and a tangible connection to ancestral time. In Aboriginal visual arts, iridescence, optical effects (think of Bridget Riley's op-art effects) and shiny, bright hues are valued for their suggestion of power and in that suggestion also provides a veil against the full force of that power. The shimmer both reveals and conceals. At the same time, these effects are also often ritually obscured, veiled, or made dull in order to further protect onlookers from those same forces.⁶

My interest in Aboriginal culture and more specifically Yolgnu culture from Arnhem land in the Northeastern part of Australia became more concrete when I was curating a twilight concert series for the 2006 Adelaide Festival called "As night softly falls." The Yolgnu in this eastern part of Australia are guardians of the light and the old women traditionally "sing the light" on to the land at dawn and away again at dusk so I wanted to visit these women to research their singing traditions.

⁵ Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), p. 68.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 185-192.



Example 1. Photos of paint brushes (*marawat*) made of my hair & ochre in foil.

Just as I was about to visit this group of women, the key woman cultural leader died. Nevertheless, I was invited to her country, a place on the coast called Dhanaya, to attend funeral ceremonies that stretched out over a month. I was there for the final week and my first exchange in the ritual camp was to give some of my (straight) hair to make extremely fine paintbrushes that were used to paint the coffin-lid. In exchange, I received mica-flecked red ochre (colored earth which is used as paint for the body and for bark paintings). I was told to rub the ochre on my skin that became silvery and this was to "protect and make me invisible to any bad spirits." This exchange of hair for ochre was an entrée for me to begin to understand something of a cultural economy of hiddenness and a system of revelation of knowledge through hiddenness that is such a strong part of this culture.

This element of hiddenness exists, for instance, in the language structure of Yolngu matha (the group of languages spoken in Arnhem land)—there are many words for, let's say, a species of snake, starting from the "outer"/public/everyday word for that snake to a series of "inner"/private/ritual words that indicate aspects of that creature in increasing proximity to its ancestral spirit meaning. Everything named in this world can exist in an array of different time dimensions. Cultural knowledge, whether expressed in language, in art, or in ritual has a highly multivalent structure of "surfaces" and "depths." There are some levels of this knowledge, some terms that might only be known to a few people and would never be spoken and only passed on by an elder on his deathbed.⁷

For me, coming into contact with Aboriginal cultural systems has involved a perspectival shift in my work from the horizontal construction of Chinese knowledge—with its cosmologies, writing systems, poetry, and other cultural forms having an architecture of receding courtyards within courtyards—to a much more vertical idea of structure made up of different layers of transparency/viscosity/opacity.

This is a structure that is akin to the structure of natural forces like weather, a structure made up of microclimates, dynamical systems in which ideas precipitate at different levels. A surface is not a static plane but part of a shifting system that registers ripple effects, shimmering, and turbulence patterns from the movement of forces below.

⁷ Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 79.

I have written a series of compositions⁸ in which I have tried to explore aspects of these ideas, especially in regard to the aesthetics of shimmer and the shimmer effect that arises from the interactivity of vertical layers. My focus on this "pattern language" level of Aboriginal culture is my way of approaching a knowledge system which utterly fascinates me but of which I clearly am not a part. Yet beyond cultural specifics, on an intuitive level, I am able to appreciate the sheer beauty of shimmer effects and the intensity of Aboriginal art, music, and performance. This intensity is something I want to bring to my work.

Invisibility (2009)

The most recent work in this line of investigation is a solo cello piece called *Invisibility* which also acts as a study piece for an orchestral work (*Pearl, Ochre, Hair String*) that I am currently writing. One of things I wanted to explore in this piece for cello was to work with an interactivity at the material level of the instrument—that is, the strings, their resonance properties and how the strings are set into motion or stopped. Firstly, I retuned the strings such that rather than having the fairly even spread of tension achieved in standard tuning (C-G-D-A), each string is retuned at a different level of tension so that each string has a different kind of "give" or resistance. The tuning is B (the lowest string dropped by a semitone), F (the next string lowered by a tone), the third string stays the same at D, and the highest string is radically detuned down to D#.

As well as these different tensions held in the strings, I employ two types of bows to activate the strings—a normal bow and then a second bow that I call a "guiro" bow, after the serrated South American percussion instrument. The bow hair is wrapped around the wood to give an alternating hair-and-wood playing surface. The two bows bring different weights and qualities of greater or lesser friction into the equation of how the instrument is sounded.

From the player's point of view, the "feel" under the fingers is that of quite different places of resistance or flow (there is more variation than usual) that need to be navigated when playing the music. This physical set-up foregrounds the material or physical aspect of the cello—a more interactive playing surface is created where the cello is not just an instrument that is somehow passively acted upon but has torque, has lines of forces that direct how it is to be played. In a real sense, the cello also plays the musician and governs the shaping of the musical sounds in a very direct way.

The "invisibility" of the title of the piece is not about silence, for the work is full of sounds. Rather, as in Grosz' and Deleuze's conception, I am working with an idea of the invisible or latent forces of the physical set-up of the instrument. What emerges as the instrument is sounded in various increasingly rhythmicized ways, producing a landscape of unpredictable nicks and ruptures as different layers of action—speed, tension, pressure of the bows and the strings—flow across each other. The composition also works with magnifications of the level of these disruptions by intensifying various paradoxical combinations—e.g., playing a string that is lightly touched at a non-harmonic node so that the string vibrates in highly complex ways producing a multiphonic effect. The string doesn't settle in any one vibrational zone but flicks or flickers (shimmers)

⁸ See separate listing below.

between states so that what results is an unpredictable array of different noises and harmonics.

The two kinds of bow used in the piece offer different possibilities of friction, for instance, the stop/start structure of the serrated bow adds an uneven granular layer of articulation over every sound. Like the cross-hatched designs or dotting effects of Aboriginal art, the bow creates a highly mobile sonic surface through which one can hear the outlines of other kinds of movements and shapes. Moving rapidly between places of relative stability and instability in terms of how the cello is sounded, the piece shows patterns of contraction and expansion, accumulation and dissipation, aligning with forces that are at work within the instrument-performer complex.

In speaking about "presence" and the act of "presencing," both in terms of an aesthetic pattern language and how it is manifested or "staged" in particular cultural worldviews, I see that this shifts how I think about composition. Rather than "writing pieces," my work becomes more about creating ritual. One useful definition of ritual for me is that it is a mode whereby rhythmicized elements, that is, repetition or the collection of actions into habit, offer a framework to observe moments of change, moments of transition towards and away from more unbounded states.

In my work, qualities of shimmer are explored in fluctuating frameworks that provide a provisional stability allowing for dialogue with emerging forces of a much more chaotic nature. A "theatre of excess" appears at the foaming edge between a perceivable pattern and its breakdown into a profusion of noise elements. The abstract structural pattern approaches the raw physical phenomena of sound in search of an intensity of embodied experience,⁹ in search of an alignment with otherness, in search of a staging of pure presence.¹⁰

⁹ See also Gumbrecht's formulation of *Erleben* or "lived experience," p.100.

¹⁰ Compositions of mine that are closely related to the themes discussed in this paper include the following:

1. *Shimmer* (2005), solo oboe, 5'
2. *Songs found in dream* (2005), ob, cl/bass bcl, sax, tpt, 2 perc, vc, dbass, 12'
3. *In the Shadow's Light* (2005), string quartet, 28'
4. *Shimmer Songs* (2006), 3 perc, harp, string quartet, 14'
5. *The Compass* (2006), large orchestra with flute and didgeridoo soloists, 22'
6. *Ochred String* (2008), oboe, viola, vc, dbass, 12'
7. *Invisibility* (2009), solo vc, 10'
8. *Pearl, Ochre, Hair String* (2009), orchestra, 20'

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