

## **Pigeonholes, Precarity, and the Zero-Sum Game of Time**

### *On Speaking Out*

On August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016, during the 70<sup>th</sup> Darmstadt Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik, under the rubric of Michael Rebhahn's *Historage* commissions, I organized a [panel](#) discussion on gender relations in the new music scene. During the talk, I presented [data](#) pulled from the Darmstadt archive charting female/male ratios of compositions performed, prizes won, participants attended, and faculty tutors for each year of the festival. This data served as a launching point for a round table discussion involving Georgina Born, Arnbjörg Danielsen, Neele Hülcker, Susanne Kirchmayr, Anne-Hilde Neset, Sam Salem, Thomas Schäfer, and Jennifer Walshe.

The forceful insight voiced by these panelists sent ripples of energy through the Darmstadt community that were incredible to witness. GRID (Gender Research in Darmstadt) events sprang up all over the place. Think tanks were organized, articles written, actions staged, websites created, interviews conducted, and stories gathered, all within the span of a few short days. The conversation was collaborative, proactive, and self-organizing. It spanned genders and generations, involved composers, performers and curators. Thomas Schäfer and Sylvia Freydank of IMD participated eagerly, intent on turning ideas into action. The speed of the movement was unusual, inspiring, and daunting.

Daunting, because to speak out brings risk, risks that close female friends from a generation above began delicately whispering to me as the week progressed. It's important that you're doing this, Ashley, but be careful. You don't want to be *that* girl. You want to be known for your work and not your politics. So speak up: but then back away. This is not your only cross to bear. You have other crosses.

In the spirit of GRID, the spirit of collectively engaging in open, collaborative, proactive conversation, I thought it might be useful to publicly reflect on this advice. To consider, out loud, some of the risks we take when we question the status quo.

### **1) Pigeonholing: The Single-Issue Label**

During the GRID panel, Arnbjörg Danielsen noted that, culturally speaking, "We associate women artists with the female sex and male artists with humanity as a whole." A recent review of my work *The Force of Things* captured this tendency impeccably.

Premiered at Darmstadt on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016, 2 days before the GRID panel, *The Force of Things* is an immersive intermedia work that wrestles with collective violence, material agency, and the haunting thrust of the anthropocene. The piece explores a post-human terrain, casting live players amidst a web of interdependent material trajectories. The ensemble begins outside the installation in which the audience sits. After ten minutes, two singers come abruptly into view at the back edge of the space. They hover like Greek choristers, commenting from afar, voicing a warning that sounds like a whisper in a language no one understands. Gradually their interventions become more emphatic. They move from outside the installation to its edges. Their labor becomes invasive and haptic: they touch, pull, scrape, bow, and ratchet, each action increasing the strain on the physical environment vibrating around the audience. Their final gesture brings them into the center of the crowd, their voices high, relentless, and unmediated for the first time in the 50-minute work – no bullhorns, no microphones, no subwoofers, no tape. Alone at the breaking point of their range, uncomfortably exposed.

While thoughts of the anthropocene, of “hyperobjects,” of timescales impossibly out of sync, of alien materials that straddle the line between organic and inorganic, passive and active, natural and fabricated, milled about my head as I wrote *The Force of Things*, a review on the IMD blog presumed I had other things in mind.

The review was titled: “Über fliegende Vaginas. Ashley Fure [sic] ‘The Force of Things,’” and goes on to read the narrative arc of the work as an anti-male diatribe, replete with puppet vaginas.

Flying Vaginas. Let’s unpack that for a minute.

First of all, could we imagine a reference to male genitalia so bluntly stated in the title of a review of a work by a man? Would the word “scrotum” appear in a headline about Simon Steen-Andersen or Klaus Lang? To link female anatomy so directly to this work not only eroticizes its content, it also implicates me, it’s creator, as a sexual object.

Men have been writing musical climaxes since the dawn of tonality. And yet, their apotheoses sing of divinity, warfare, and the triumph of the will. When women compose intensity arcs that end in collapse, they, evidently, sing of their vaginas.

*The Force of Things* was created over two years, the product of a deeply collaborative design process between a diverse and committed team. Two months ago, I decided to organize a panel discussion on gender and new music as part of my *Historage* project.

The two acts are unrelated. One does not collapse into the other. To backwards interpret *The Force of Things* as a manifesto related to the incredible energy the GRID project unexpectedly unleashed at Darmstadt is a gesture of ignorance and unquestioned bias.

Which brings me back to the issue of pigeonholing, and the risk that if I speak of gender too loudly, all of my work will begin to be seen as women's work, the blunt articulation of a feminist agenda, a banner for my sex and nothing beyond.

## **2) Precarity: Politics in the Land of Aesthetic Autonomy**

Viewed through simple statistics, female composers are by nature more professionally precarious than their male counterparts. We have less safety in numbers, less historical precedents, and less representation in positions of power. The vast majority of curators, teachers, ensemble directors, publishers, and critics making decisions that impact our professional trajectories are cis white males.

In our GRID panel, Jen Walshe noted the troubling lack of transparency in artistic lines of work. We don't know who's paid what when, we don't know how curatorial decisions are made, or why certain ensembles receive bigger budgets than others. This opacity makes legislating inclusivity in artistic domains more difficult than in sectors such as government, law, business, or academia.

The right of artistic freedom complicates the matter further. Any curator, claiming aesthetic autonomy, can say at any moment: I choose what I choose, I pay what I pay, I value what I value. Any ensemble can say: we'd like to program more women, but we just can't find any who fit with our aesthetic agenda. That's a hard line to argue with. It sets up a binary: quality or inclusion, aesthetic value or identity politics. To question the homogeneity in our scene is to risk being framed a relativist intent on lowering the level of artistic merit to let in the masses.

Furthermore, anyone, at any time, for any reason can stop supporting your work. If you make the powers that be uncomfortable, if you step on toes, ruffle feathers and make yourself a political nuisance, you risk an invisible backlash hidden beneath the veil of aesthetic autonomy.

Which brings me back to the whispered warnings of friends: be careful, Ashley. Protect your career. Don't give anyone a reason to slow it down.

## **3) Time: The Canon Needs Us**

This work: the gathering of data, the speaking on panels, the policy brainstorming, the shepherding of an energetic upsurge of interest, the diplomatic negotiations with language and format and tone: this work is unpaid and time consuming. It can be inspiring, but it is exhausting.

My relationship to this activism is complicated. On the one hand, I know I was born in a privileged country at an incredibly privileged moment in history. I have been

believed in, supported, challenged, promoted, and acknowledged at each stage of my creative development. Historically speaking, that is an astoundingly uncommon story for a female composer to tell. Of course, not every female composer of my generation shares this story, and certainly disturbingly few of our trans, queer, and colleagues of color do, but the fact that even a handful of us have finally benefitted from the mechanisms so many cis white male artists before us have represents a sea change. A pivotal historical moment.

Some of us now have access to the resources we need to make the work we believe in. What a gift that is. And with that gift, to my mind, comes an obligation to build our boldest aesthetic visions. I can say without pretense and in purely demographic terms: the canon needs us. Our most radical action is in making work.

And so it's a delicate balance. On a certain level, time is a zero sum game. To spend time organizing panel discussions and collecting data and teaching is to spend it not composing. We could think the transaction more subtly: teaching hopefully gives energy back, activism hopefully changes the world in which our work exists for the better. But there still needs to *be* the work.

Balancing those competing pressures is complex. I believe in our community and am convinced that breaking through its homogeneity will revitalize and animate us, bring in richer and wilder work, more engaged audiences, and more forceful cultural impact. But activism and artistry compete for time, and so the words of my friends return again: be careful, Ashley, this is not your only cross to bear. You have other crosses.

## **Postlude**

This is a reflection in progress of a movement in process, offered in a spirit of dialogue. I am honored and inspired to have witnessed and taken part in what transpired these past two weeks at Darmstadt. It feels like a ripe moment in time, perhaps a tipping point, if we're smart about it. There is energy from the ground up, and energy from the top down. I would like to be a part of steering this energy productively. I would like to be a force for positive change. But there are risks in doing so, and I am weighing them here, publicly, in a gesture of honesty, wondering where to draw my lines, wondering if a parallel universe exists where:

- Those with the most professional security shoulder the lion's share of risk.
- The think tank work of brainstorming policies to create a more inclusive community is institutionally acknowledged and formally remunerated.
- Cis white males take on the bulk of the time burden of this activism, leaving space for female, trans, queer and composers of color to produce work that stretches the canon from within.

Perhaps it doesn't. Or doesn't yet?