

Subjectivity, Space, and Scale in Udo Kasemets' *Counterbomb Renga*

Draft Chapter for *Intensities: the Intersensory Affect of Sound*

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On March 8, 1983, two-dozen musicians, poets, and speakers gathered in Bloor Street United Church in Toronto, Canada to perform *Counterbomb Renga*, a project conceived and coordinated by Estonian-Canadian composer Udo Kasemets. Inspired by Jonathan Schell's 1982 book *The Fate of the Earth*, which argued that human extinction was the inevitable outcome of nuclear proliferation in the absence of immediate intervention, Kasemets called *Counterbomb* an "invitation" for artists to participate in a "musical/poetic statement" (Kasemets 1983, 2) demanding the worldwide abolition of nuclear arms. *Counterbomb* involved the creative participation from nearly one hundred people, who contributed fragments of music, poetry, and artistic statements, sent to Toronto on cassette tapes from around the world. *Counterbomb Renga*'s documentation exists in two forms: an archival recording from the concert broadcast on radio by the CBC that April, and a dedicated edition of *Musicworks* magazine featuring the correspondence, poetic verses, notated fragments, and other ephemera related to the work.

Counterbomb Renga lasted for about two hours in performance, with audience members drifting in and out of the reverberant church sanctuary amidst a sparse but heterogeneous texture of sound: spoken word and concrete poetry (in several languages) was read live and simultaneously played through speakers positioned above and behind the audience—the mediation of voice by microphone, loudspeaker, and tape emphasized the telematic and multi-sited dimension of the piece; musicians stationed on stage and in the balcony (above and behind the main seating area) performed from scores prepared by Kasemets, independently from one another, interspersed with pre-recorded performances. Throughout, an obbligato of prepared piano and pre-recorded electroacoustic sounds provided continuity to the performance, fading in and out of audibility as *Counterbomb* progressed through its sequence of events to its conclusion. Commissioned originally for CBC Radio's *Two New Hours*, Kasemets cautioned, at the beginning of its broadcast, that the recorded document

...should not be considered an anthology of poetry and sounds, or a musical composition; not art for art's sake; not words and musics to entertain. What will be heard will be a documentation—not a documentary, but *documentation* of the pooling of creative energies of a good number of people, all of them expressing their concern about a crucial social issue: the issue of the survival of mankind in the shadow of the nuclear bomb (Kasemets 1983a).

In this chapter, I want to examine *Counterbomb Renga* as a politico-aesthetic configuration of subjectivities—what Shannon Jackson calls a "social work" (2011)—and situate the event within a framework of experimental and socially critical experimental arts practice. In turning to Foucault's later shift in thought towards the techniques of the self, we can consider *Counterbomb* as an ethopoetic moment, one that "transforms an individual's mode of being" (2005, 237) and engenders relational modes of knowledge. *Counterbomb* activated, temporarily, a network of subjective affinities among a diffuse body of artists, connected and spatialized through performance, print, and broadcast media. I investigate the nature of this spatialization, and explore how media, as cultural technologies (Berland 2009), work in concert to produce a community around *Counterbomb*. Finally, I consider scale in *Counterbomb Renga* in terms of both space and its capacity as a socially efficacious work. Although *Counterbomb* reached a

national audience and included the creative input of a hundred contributors, it is at its core rooted in post-Cagean mixed media performance. *Counterbomb* iterates, in expansion, the logics of small-scale community-based practice Kasemets championed in promoting experimental art, and its unique resonance lies in the relationships emergent within those scalar, spatial and subjective dimensions—relationships that suggest the transformational potential of experimental practice might go beyond merely the discursive.

In the early 1980s, as the Cold War between Soviet Russia and the West was entering its fourth decade, the threat of worldwide nuclear extinction had spawned not only an international grassroots movement for the de-proliferation of arms, but also a number of scientific studies and popular books warning of the global impacts of nuclear war. As Peter de Leon remarked at the time, the debate about nuclear weapons had moved beyond closed, expert-based circles; it was “no longer [an] arcane,” esoteric discussion amongst policy makers and physicists (1983, 182). The impending crisis of global nuclear disaster was being circulated in public discourse not only as a political and military issue, but as the central moral, philosophical, and even “spiritual” and “psychohistorical” (Austin 1985) concern facing humanity. Gayle Young and Gordon Monahan were both associated with Kasemets in the early 1980s, and both participated in the performance of *Counterbomb Renga*. Young, who played the *amaranth*¹ during the event, commented that “everything was out of control,” and told me she thought the work reflected the mood of the time (2013). Pianist Gordon Monahan also contextualized *Counterbomb* within the Cold War politics of anxiety and fear, and noted that U.S. President Ronald Reagan was “ratcheting up” the arms race against the Soviet Union; people were, in Monahan’s words, “generally freaking out.” *Counterbomb* was “a kind of initiative...to bring about world peace.... This was one of Udo’s efforts to—as a composer, artist—[ask] *what can you do?* Well, he came up with this very public event” (2012).

Schell’s *The Fate of the Earth* has come to be widely considered a seminal work on nuclear de-proliferation, and has retrospectively been called the one text which reinvigorated the anti-nuclear movement in the early 1980s (Walker 2007). Divided into three long sections, it details the hypothetical outcome of a nuclear holocaust. The United States, as he postulates, would become a “republic of insects and grass” for decades following atomic war. In the final section, subtitled “The Choice,” Schell urges readers that the time for passive ignorance is over. He writes, “Because everything we do and everything we are is in jeopardy, and because the peril is immediate and unremitting, every person is the right person to act and every moment is the right moment to begin, starting with the present moment” (1982, 226). Schell closes with a simple warning, dividing humanity into two ethically divergent camps:

Two paths lie before us. One leads to death, the other to life. If we choose the first path—if we numbly refuse to acknowledge the nearness of extinction, all the while increasing our preparations to bring it about—then we in effect become the allies of death...and we will sink into stupefaction, as though we were gradually weaning ourselves from life in preparation for the end (1982, 231).

Counterbomb Renga’s source material is taken from this final section, and forms the core upon which the entire piece is structured. The work is rooted conceptually in Kasemets’ long-standing interest in exploring the medial properties of text and sound in non-narrative compositional situations. Much of Kasemets’ compositions up to the early 1980s had been experiments in translating language from the visual-alphabetic fixity of print typography into sound through the

medium of the voice: the singing and recitation of visual language has consistently remained at the heart of Kasemets' creative practice as the primary basis for intermediality. Composer Linda Catlin Smith was a key organizer of the 1983 performance, and worked closely with Kasemets until his death in 2014. She remarked:

Udo was interested in monody, that each person make one sound at a time. And that's a very special thing, because of course there is a kind of harmony in existence in the way that sound will coincide. You have more than one pitch; you have harmony. But he was not intent on that and he didn't want the players to be intent on harmony. He was looking for the monodic—really the *intensity of each special sound on its own*. And that may well relate to poetry too, and that every word is so carefully chosen (2013, emphasis added).

Like the bulk of his work, the compositional processes in *Counterbomb* are derived entirely from John Cage (Kasemets 2010).² Kasemets created the textual and musical material for *Counterbomb* by composing a series of mesostic poems on phrases taken from the final pages of "The Choice." Cage himself had recently made use of acrostic and mesostic technique in *Theme and Variations* (1979–80), a series of text pieces wherein horizontal poetic verses expand outwards alongside a single word oriented vertically (in that piece, names of people who had influenced Cage's thinking: Marshall McLuhan, James Joyce, Buckminster Fuller, and so on) which forms the thematic and alphabetic axis of the stanza.

[Insert Figure 1]

Figure 1: Acrostic from *Counterbomb Renga*, reproduced in *Musicworks* 22 (Winter 1983). Reprinted with permission.

The acrostics Kasemets generated were mailed, along with notebooks and blank cassettes, to a wide network of poets and writers in Canada, the United States, and Europe with the intention of building a *renga*—a multi-authored chain of linked poetic verses. *Renga*-making was a communal, oral-literary form of entertainment cultivated between the eighth and fifteenth centuries in Japan. It chiefly involved a group of poets assembled together to versify extemporaneously around a theme—a place or thing as a textual locus of inspiration (Horton 1993, 449)—which was committed to writing by a scribe as the session progressed. Governed by rules of form, repetition, and seriation, *renga*-making was marked by overlapping vocality, episodocity, virtuosity, oral economy, and constant change: "All members of the session took in the voice simultaneously; the orality was all encompassing, and it drew the poets in a shared poetic experience.... The composition was animated and ephemeral" (Horton 1993, 471). The *rengas* themselves, once assembled, consisted of chains of short poetic statements in *tanka* form (syllabically arranged 5-7-5, 7-7) by the different contributors, following various grammatical, thematic, and symbological rules: any given link in the chain had to form a poem with the previous link, but also form a new poem with the following link. *Renga* reached an apex in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; according to Kasemets, two rival *renga* masters organized sessions in 1391 and 1394 which culminated in chains of 10,000 links (Kasemets 1982, 4).

Kasemets' use of *renga* as a structural model had recent literary and musical precedents in the West. Octavio Paz, along with three other poets (Charles Tomlinson, Jacques Robaud, and Edoardo Sanguinetti) had collaborated to write a quadrilingual *renga* (1972) in Spanish, English, French, and Italian, using sonnet form and a permutation system to determine sequence of the

stanzas. Their renga was an experimental poem that oscillated between language and non-language, exploring the dissolution of ego in Western authorship. It was a platform for exposing the interplay of power, language, and authority in an international context, according to Timothy Clark (1992, 32). Clark writes that Paz's *Renga* "disrupts the identity of any one national language and thereby affirms not a shared European or world context of communication, but an ambivalent code, peculiar to itself," that is neither national or international, but a "fractal structure of zigzagging borders" (1992, 34–35). Language, depending on the reader, functions variously in this context along a continuum of semantic cognition to increasingly aesthetic sensory phenomena, a technical device deployed by Paz *et al* that serves to interrupt readability, linearity, and also enjoins the text's users to remain more actively engaged in the emergent materiality of words-as-sounds. In *Counterbomb*, fragments of texts were read in English, Spanish, Japanese, and several other languages. Linda Catlin Smith comments that "the sound of [different languages] is completely equal" to Kasemets. "He treasured the sound of both words and non-words, because it's coming from the human voice" (2013). She observed that English was Kasemets' fourth language as a speaker, after Estonian, Russian, and German, and that polylinguality works, for Kasemets, as a way to connect cultures and people together, rather than pull them apart: "Those sounds would be very beautiful to him as sounds. And even their differences would be extremely important to him" (2013).

Cage had also used the renga model, rather loosely, in both his 1976 U.S. bicentennial commission *Renga* (78 parts for any instrument and/or voice), but also as an organizational strategy for *Theme and Variations*.³ Cage's *Renga* utilized the syllabic structure of Japanese tanka poems to organize drawings by Henry David Thoreau, and the much more prosodic and modal *Theme and Variations* employs a loose chain structure in creating links between subject areas. But the communal dimensions of original Japanese renga practice become a defining characteristic of Kasemets' project. As Gayle Young describes, *Counterbomb* was different from Cage's works precisely for this reason. She compared *Counterbomb* to Cage's *HPSCHD* in that "they were similar in their impenetrable simultaneity," but the social and cultural context of *Counterbomb* was its distinguishing feature: "There was a hope that it would resonate" (2013).

In addition to the acrostics/mesostics based on phrases from *The Fate of the Earth*, Kasemets created 121 "tankostics," poems conforming to the syllabic structure of Japanese tanka which also amalgamate the acrostic/mesostic principles of metathematic inscription. The tankostics were then translated into musical notation using a system of Kasemets' devising, which were sent to musicians in Toronto, who in turn were asked to generate their own musical links.

[Insert Figure 2]

Figure 2: Tankostic from *Counterbomb Renga*, reproduced in *Musicworks* 22 (Winter 1983).
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The final macrostructural component of the work was the "Chain Chant," performed by Gordon Monahan—a pre-composed (and pre-recorded) series of tankostic-derived fragments for piano and electronics realized in advance of the March 1983 performance, whose function was to add a layer of continuity to the proceedings. At times centrally audible, at others barely perceptible, the Chain Chant lasted the entire duration of the event, as a kind of sonic substrate binding the work together.

[Insert Figure 3]

Figure 3: Excerpt of the ‘Chain Chant’ from *Counterbomb Renga*, reproduced in *Musicworks 22* (Winter 1983). Reprinted with permission.

The notebooks, scorebooks and cassettes that were returned to Kasemets (filled with pages of poetry and musical notation, and recordings of the poets and musicians reciting or performing their links) were sequenced together for their presentation as a renga at the concert in the church. A number of Toronto-based poets and musicians were coordinated to perform live, along with the pre-recorded renga links, including two Japanese survivors of Hiroshima, whom Kasemets and Linda Catlin Smith had reached through the Japanese consulate in Toronto. Finally, Kasemets had many of the poetic fragments translated, mirroring the heteroglot nature of Paz *et al*'s *Renga*, which were recorded for recitation as links in the chain. The metaphorical connections between the piece's form and atomic chain reactions occurring as a byproduct of nuclear fission are apparent: the splitting of nuclei releases intense amounts of energy capable of causing a self-sustaining succession of macroscopic fissions; and a generative cycle of musico-poetic material grows out in an ever-expansive ring based on self-sustaining creative dynamism. But *Counterbomb Renga*'s “reactivity” does not end at the horizons of the aesthetic—its catalytic properties go far beyond that in impacting the subjective.

The performance of *Counterbomb* was recorded for broadcast on the program *Two New Hours* by CBC producer David Jaeger. He had been involved in *Counterbomb* from the beginning, and was instrumental in not only getting the work aired, but also in introducing Kasemets to Linda Catlin Smith, and in helping to offset production expenses that made the event possible. He felt he had become part of “something rather extraordinary,” that in the particular political climate within the CBC itself *Counterbomb* was radical, and as he says, a “strong and bold thing to be doing” (2012). He explained that the CBC Toronto Orchestra had just been disbanded due to budgetary constraints, and the leadership of the organization was steering the CBC away from concert presentation. The political implications for him were less about nuclear proliferation, and had more to do with taking a position “to help advance the cause of contemporary musical creation in Canada.” Jaeger told me that he and his production team were anticipating a backlash from not only their radio audience, due to *Counterbomb*'s demanding length and unorthodox composition, but also from CBC management for stepping out of rank by dedicating the entire program to the work. As he put it, it was a feeling of “being on the edge.” Linda Catlin Smith commented that it was “one of the bravest things the CBC has ever done”—and also one of the most unusual (2013).

Catlin Smith was the main personnel coordinator for the project, and told me that despite all of the work's “impenetrable” characteristics—its length, its multilinguality, its resistance to narrative coherence, its stylistic heterogeneity—it was *Counterbomb*'s political dimensions which allowed people a point of entry into its imposing sonic framework. It was a “peace project” in her describing, so even if the “music was weird, people could buy into it on that level” (2012). It also was the first time she had had the chance to work with Kasemets, having moved to Toronto the year before in 1981.⁴ In a follow-up conversation with Catlin Smith, I asked her to elaborate on the “impenetrable” texture of *Counterbomb*. She replied:

I have this memory of being at church at night, or twilight, and just this—churches are by nature large mysterious spaces. The complexity, maybe that's a better word than impenetrability, but the complexity of the sound—its all about independence in a way.

Each person is creating their own link to this material. So, they're not playing together as such and yet they're all listening and intent on what they're doing (2013).

She noted how this related to the spoken element of *Counterbomb*, how “every word is so carefully chosen. So that I feel—there is a complexity to listening to that, and yet, it also has the simplicity of sitting in nature, where one sound happens, and another sound, everything is happening at once. It has that kind of openness to it” (2013). In *Counterbomb Renga* the materiality of listened-to sound objects, the perambulatory bodies entering and exiting the venue, and the dark, reverberant sanctuary of the church all coalesce in ways that cannot be experienced when we engage with this piece on recording. As an audio document, elements of that performance environment can be gleaned—the indeterminate collision of voices, languages both understood and heard only as paralinguistic textures, and the heterophony of instruments recreate to some extent the conditions for listening; but the material interaction those elements in that setting, for those present, and how it shaped their experience remain elusive, subjective and beyond the scope of analysis.

Tina Pearson was the editor for *Musicworks* at the time and oversaw publication of the *Counterbomb* issue in winter 1983, in addition to her role as music director for the project (and flautist during the concert). She recalled that “some people got it, some people [didn't]...it was the sense of *invitation* that was crucial.”⁵ The complexity of *Counterbomb* as a composition was matched by its power in activating a network of political and ethical alliances. In remembering the moment she decided to become involved, Pearson described her thinking as, “Let's see if we can do something [and see] what will ripple out from there...so that to me was like, ‘well of course I want to do that’” (ibid). Yet Gayle Young commented that the political nature of the work was not explicit—it wasn't an openly “didactic” work: “It's a very interesting paradox. It didn't have a literal connection to disarmament. It wasn't didactic in the sense that you'd expect a topic like that to be.... It was structurally there but it was not perceptually there” (2013). Catlin Smith also reiterated that any overt didacticism was mitigated by its rootedness “in something very real, that in a way the didacticism sort of falls away” (2013).

In Claire Bishop's examination of participatory and socially engaged art, *Artificial Hells*, she draws from philosopher Jacques Rancière's observation on the (false) antinomy between art's autonomy and its heteronomy—art's self containment versus the countervailing influence of the external, which he frames in a discussion of the aesthetic against the political. Bishop notes that the present discourse surrounding social artworks relies on “an ethical reasoning that fails to accommodate the aesthetic or to understand it as an autonomous realm of experience” (2011, 40). Rancière writes that the aesthetic and the political are not “counterposed;” rather, as he explains, “The autonomy is the autonomy of the experience, not of the work of art. To put it differently, the artwork participates in the sensorium of autonomy inasmuch as it is not a work of art” (2002, 136). The autonomy of art becomes effectively “a tension between two heteronomies” (2002, 147).

Elsewhere, Rancière elaborates on art's heteronomous quality by locating efficacy not in how it offers models of behavior—what Young and Catlin Smith both described as didacticism—but in its relationality, “first and foremost in partitions of space and time that it produces to define ways of being together or separate, being in front of, or in the middle of, being inside or outside, etc.” (2010, 136–137). As an artwork, *Counterbomb* offered not so much a lesson in ethics or politics as it opened a kind of autonomous sensory space. It was a moment of acute subjective configuration, which magnetized a dislocated network of artists around the

singular topical locus of nuclear abolition, and even (as Monahan remembers) “world peace” (2012). I am thus considering it an *ethopoetic* moment (Foucault 2005, 237), one which has the capacity to produce subjective transformation. Subjectivity for Foucault was not a state to be occupied, but a practice to be performed (Taylor 2011, 173), and this practice of subjectivity requires a host of ethical protocols, techniques of discipline, and constant monitoring as part of the hermeneutics of self-governance (Mendietta 2011, 119). In Foucault’s use, the term relates specifically to a kind of knowledge that contributes to the *formation* of ethos, a knowledge that is orientational with respect to a subject’s position in the world. There is knowledge, as Foucault reminds us, that is superfluous and insignificant, but also knowledge that is transformational—not only of the self, but also of others as a practice of freedom (ibid).

In Alan Beaulieu’s phrasing, the ethopoetics of the self is a “non-disciplinary” practice of self-discipline (2006, 30), removed from the “networks of sequestration” and panoptic control in a Foucauldian disciplinary society (ibid). In *Experimentalism Otherwise*, Benjamin Piekut similarly parses this distinction between ‘training’ (in the Foucauldian disciplinary sense) and an ethopoetic technique of the self, in his analysis of Charlotte Moorman’s preparation and performance of *26’ 1.1499*” by John Cage in 1964. In Piekut’s trenchant analysis, Cage’s piece gave Moorman “the opportunity to separate from the mode of subjectivation [*assujettissement*] of her traditional cello training and to reapproach her corporeal relationship to the instrument without the histories sedimented in the actions of her body” (2011, 149). Moorman famously used Cage’s score as the incipit to radical interpretation—with which Cage was less than pleased—but also as a *problematization* (per Foucault) of the ethical field of training and performance: in short, according to Piekut, the site of engagement between Cage’s score and Moorman becomes one where “agency emerges as the management of subjectivity” (148).

Beaulieu further considers a Foucauldian ethopoetics, quite simply, as people “working on themselves” (ibid). As a model to theorize what *Counterbomb* offered in the way as a window into action, an invitation, we can also think of the ethopoetic moment as one not only of “turning one’s gaze from the world in order to shift it towards the self” (Foucault 2005, 229) in a moment of intense self scrutiny, but one, as Davide Panagia describes, which is “fundamentally invested in that which makes interactivity possible” (2009, 157, n.4). I use the term here to account for *Counterbomb*’s *invitational* nature to articulate a network of social, political, and ethical affinities, which otherwise may have remained obscured and deactivated. The community of experimental musicians and sound-poets in Toronto, whom Pearson described as being “isolated in little enclaves,” (2012) were connected together in a creative response to what was then (and arguably, now) perceived as the most pressing threat to global security, but also in an activity of articulating subjectivity—of doing some work on themselves. According to Panagia, the appearance of such networks and relations is attended by a crucial *interruption*, which he assigns to the process of politics in general. Such an interruption “happens when a relation or attachment is formed between heterological elements: it is a part-taking in the activities of representation that renders perceptible what had previously been insensible” (2009, 3). Put another way, these new relations, as political affinities, become materialized in sound *in spite of* their indirect manifestations as such.

But the connections which *Counterbomb* facilitated reached beyond Toronto’s small experimental arts community, and the project was crucial in defining spatial relationships precisely through the communications media that gave shape to *Counterbomb*’s form as a cultural object. Kasemets had intended from the outset to “realize” *Counterbomb* not only in a live performance medium, but also in print and as a radio piece as a way of altering the texture of

its material presence. In the Fall 1982 edition of *Musicworks*, Kasemets composed a stylized dialogue with himself, published in the form of an interview, as a way of generating awareness of the project and describing *Counterbomb Renga* to his direct local audience: “There is a subtle process...in motion across the land. It is about to turn public in 1983. In order to shed some light on this activity I talked to myself” (1982, 3). In problematizing the inevitability of an “incomplete project” due to the vagaries of the postal service, the demands on peoples’ time, organizational obstructions, and the like, Kasemets muses (to himself):

...we are not thinking of a final product of a fixed renga but an ongoing process that takes its energy from the renga principle and continues until the ultimate goal—nuclear disarmament—is achieved.

But if this chain isn’t linked end to end, its force remains unused, the individual energies put into it disperse: the whole effect becomes entropic rather than explosive.

Therefore while the antibomb renga-making follows its own course, we also generate situations where words will be read, the poems spoken will be heard, the sounds imagined will be made.

Publications. Performances. Broadcasts (Kasemets 1982, 4. Bold and italics in original).

Counterbomb from its inception was intended to exist in multiple medial modes, a multiplex of “sensible” forums. Jody Berland uses the phrase “cultural technologies” in discussing the processes of mediality to acknowledge the “subjects and subjectivities produced through interaction with these technologies along with their heterogeneity and ambivalence” (2009, 12). Cultural technologies are thus “implicated in changing structurations of space and time in the forming and fragmentation of communities” (2009, 13). In a sense, all technologies are cultural, but I am drawn to Berland’s conflation of space and subjectivity as a definitional nuance of communications technology. In considering media as transmission of certain content and as the “primal scene constituting social relations,” (quoting Van Wyck 2004, 3) Berland reminds us that communication mediates these relations by “materializing them across time or space” (2009, 99).

The *Musicworks* magazine published in Winter 1983, featuring a collection of the textual material comprising *Counterbomb*, was valuable not only as a rich visual analogue to the work’s sonic and experiential dimensions, but it also reinforced and concretized those social relations with respect to time and space. In a letter to Tina Pearson from Fall 1982, Kasemets wrote that the layout of the issue was important: its goal was to highlight “the chainness of the concept,”⁶ and Pearson recalled that publishing it was in the service of “reach[ing] out and be[ing] more connected to things.” She recalled, “I was interested in concepts of time, and how we experience time, and what an issue of *Musicworks* could connect with and how people in a lot of different places could [be together].” The *Musicworks* issue impacted *Counterbomb*’s temporality by augmenting it beyond the performance itself and echoing the non-linearity of the work in its mosaic layout of text and image. Yet it also proved to be a crucial mnemonic aid in helping my informants connect themselves *back* to the event and their experience with it after so many years: in many cases, our conversations emerged out of the tactile interaction with its material contents.

Its very artifactuality contained traces of *Counterbomb*'s past resonances and rekindled those spatial relations after they had faded over time.

[Insert Figure 4]

Figure 2: Page from *Musicworks* 22 (Winter 1983). Reprinted with permission.

The radio broadcast was crucial to the project as well, as a way of connecting listeners across a broader spatial design. In explaining his role in the project, David Jaeger revealed that he was more concerned with the work as an art music composition rather than as political intervention: "As radio people, we were much more conscious of ways that are needed to make all the content fit. It was very much a thick web of, shall we say, polyphony...[with] asynchronous elements happening simultaneously." Jaeger told me he felt committed to a sense of responsibility in communicating the work in a comprehensible way to a wider audience as a radio piece, and worked with Kasemets in studio to prepare it for broadcast. Throughout the two-hour program, Kasemets' voice appears regularly in scripted segments to contextualize and explain the piece's inner workings, its form as a *renga*, how it came together over time, and of course its larger aims as a political statement. Its "public performance reality" as Jaeger called it, was inadequately suited for radio, so both he and Kasemets worked on tailoring *Counterbomb* to help listeners who were not at the concert to navigate the potentially inhospitable sonic terrain.

All the material iterations of *Counterbomb* mediated through the technologies of print, radio, and performance are constitutive of the spatiotemporal relationships which have outlasted the works' political topicality. Ian Angus writes that

Space exists only insofar as it is traversed in some manner, and time exists only through the means of transmission between generations. Communications media thus constitute...the limits of what is experienceable, and the manner in which it is experienced, in a *social formation*" (2000, 21–22, my emphasis).

Following Berland, I wish to emphasize that the "heterogeneity and ambivalence" which marks these social formations, in part a by-product of *Counterbomb*'s mediatisation through cultural technologies, relates to the heterogeneous sonic materiality of the work. *Counterbomb* is multidirectional as an aesthetic object, and in effect resists representational (or structural, or narrative) analysis by the kaleidoscopic ambience of musical-textual materiality, the opaque nature of its assembly, and crucially, its diffuse and dialogic authorial provenance. This multidirectionality imprints *Counterbomb*'s spatiotemporality with an ambivalence and refutation of compositional narrativity that positions listeners everywhere and nowhere at once from a perceptual and sensory standpoint. As Monahan recalled, musicians were positioned throughout the perimeter of the performance space, with several on the main stage, and balcony, enveloping the seated audience in sound: "It was multiple tracks being played back at any given time, multiple sound systems all over the place...it was kind of like a circus set-up" (2012). Catlin Smith said that *Counterbomb* was anchored by "the idea of the spatial aspect; that sound was around us. There was a nearness and a farness to it," adding that "because there was also recorded material, there was a sense of depth of field" (2013)

Media theorist Marshall McLuhan would call the spatial insinuations of *Counterbomb* "acoustic," which in McLuhan's use of the word implied a holistic and relational figuring of space.⁷ Kasemets affirmed McLuhan's sonic bias in reminding me that the written word, or any

representational medium of language, is nothing more than a notation for sound (2010). Gayle Young offered a more critical take on *Counterbomb*'s "acoustic" qualities: "The piece probably reflects that sense of things flying into the irrational at unbelievable speed," adding, "in that sense it reflects the negative aspects of McLuhan's understanding of acoustic space, where are clarity, logical thought, basic utilitarianism is out the window" (2013).

When we were talking about the separation between the sonic and the visual, or the heard and the seen, Kasemets said, "visual relationships develop only sporadically, really, in comparison with hearing, which is always present" (2010). But I would argue that despite this separation that both McLuhan and Kasemets advocate, *Counterbomb* indexes an infinitely variable interplay of sensory relationships. While the model of acoustic space fits neatly into place alongside the larger themes and metaphors at play here—world peace, global security, connectedness, immediacy—the microcosmic elements of *Counterbomb* maintain an internal equilibrium reliant precisely upon intersensory counterbalances. The piece makes less sense when you take any one element away, and each of its medial iterations reinforce, complicate, or illuminate different meanings found in others. As Gayle Young remarked, the piece is emblematic of the "electric conditions" that McLuhan theorized, conditions that are bound up in the sensorial interplay of "audile-tactile" space: "It was pretty overwhelming, with sound coming at you from every direction, and nothing foregrounded. In that sense it reflects the lack of centre that I think people were feeling at the time" (2013).

Shannon Jackson has explored the political and social efficacy of art, paying particular attention to how the intermedial qualities of an art work—or event—have the capabilities of engendering relationality between the work and its spectators. She writes that "socially engaged art seems to require artists to develop skills in more than one medium," and comments on the role of medium specificity in configuring affinities, which

structures the perceptual apparatuses of different viewers who might disagree about what in fact they are seeing—whether it is intelligible or unintelligible, spectacular or restrained, alienating or interactive, referential or abstract, fast or slow. Medium specificity can also have a kind of chiasmic quality as we increasingly realize that the disruption of one medium often requires a reskilling in the techniques of another (2011, 19).

Gayle Young recalled a particular aspect of performing in *Counterbomb* that speaks to the chiasmus of intermediality. She said she felt a tension between embodiment and disembodiment that arose from performing on the amaranth, an instrument with limited amplitude. Not only was she unable to hear or see other musicians and poets, she was inaudible to herself—giving up, in her words, "the central action of musical performance." She described this feeling as a medial one, of performance as an extension of the body. Not being able to perceive those actions—the disembodiment of her performance reflected the "incomprehensibility of the event itself" (2013). The descriptions of *Counterbomb* as impenetrable, irrational, asynchronous, with nothing foregrounded, and so forth, emphasize a squarely Cagean imagining of sound as material in *flux*—as Christoph Cox writes,

a ceaseless production of heterogeneous sonic matter, the components of which move at different speeds and with different intensities, and involve complex relationships of simultaneity, interference, conflict, concord, and parallelism. This flux precedes and

exceeds individual listeners and, indeed, composers, whom Cage came to conceive less as creators than as curators of this sonic flux (Cox 2011, 155).

Writing on Cage's 1952 mixed media event at Black Mountain College, widely recognized to have been the first "happening" (before Allan Kaprow formally adopted that term for later works staged in the 1950s and 60s), Michael Kirby calls the performance units Cage employed *alogical*: they "did not pass information back and forth or 'explain each other;'" the elements in the performance remained "intellectually discrete" (1969, 81). In the chiasmic, "incomprehensible" materiality of intermedial works, the dissolution of intellectual coherence makes room for a new sensory understanding of the alogical, as Kirby reminds us. He writes, "The structure of all music...and of abstract or nonobjective painting and sculpture upon sensory rather than intellectual relationships" (ibid). In the mid 1960s, Kasemets was invested in exposing Toronto listeners to contemporaneous trends of mixed media performance practices. *Counterbomb Renga* is positioned squarely within the purview of these activities, and I consider it a modulation of the work Kasemets was doing at the local level in mobilizing experimental music through "DIY" (do-it-yourself) efforts of community organization. As an instantiation of those practices, expanded in ambition and scope, *Counterbomb* reflects the ground-level movement of small-scale experimental art-making on the margins of Toronto's cultural landscape, and attests to a cultural "rootedness" (as Linda Catlin Smith remarked) and affirmation of locality within the nebulous and perhaps tenuous global connections to which *Counterbomb* aspires.

Kasemets told me time and again⁸ that he had thought of himself, more than as a composer, as someone who liked to "get things going," and his impact on the experimental music community in Toronto today is still tangible. Much of this took shape in the years following his discovery of Cage in 1961 and his attempts to import those ideas into Toronto's musical life. Those entrepreneurial efforts manifested in a number of initiatives: As director of the Isaacs Gallery Mixed Media Ensemble from 1965–67, Kasemets staged Fluxus-style happenings, with visual and performance art, poetry, music, and dance pieces featuring local and international avant-garde performers. The Mixed Media concerts were held principally in Avrom Isaacs' spacious Yonge Street Gallery, the epicentre of Toronto's abstract expressionist art scene. Before moving to that space, Isaacs' smaller "Greenwich Gallery" launched the careers of Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland, Graham Coughtry, and Gordon Rayner (among others) in the late 1950s. The Isaacs Gallery cultivated a small but intense scene of young, forward thinking artists, poets, and musicians that gravitated to the space when it began hosting poetry readings (started by Raymond Souster) and informal music concerts by the Artists' Jazz Band (a free improvising group of visual artists, including Coughtry, Rayner, Snow, and many others) in the early part of the decade. It provided a crucial space for experimental concerts to flourish at a time when traditional music venues were out of reach for Kasemets, and set an early precedent that continues to thrive today in Toronto (and elsewhere) for independent artist-run centres operating outside institutionalized mainstreams for art and music.

In 1968 Kasemets leveraged the reputation he had built as an avant-garde agitator by organizing *SightSoundSystems* at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute. Billed as a festival of art and technology, it symbolized the opening of the Toronto branch of E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology), the New York-based collective mandated to foster developments between artists and engineers through creative uses of emerging technologies. *SightSoundSystems* remains best known for the opening concert *Reunion* that pitted Cage and Marcel Duchamp against each other

in two amplified matches of chess, but was programmed to explore the various possibilities of communications technology, experimental art, and the aestheticized environment through interactive compositions, non-narrative “lecture-essays” and site-specific installations. The *Canavanguard* publication series of graphic scores, which Kasemets curated from 1967–70, was perhaps the most conceptually developed enterprise of the period. It included its own published manifesto, and was aimed at “connecting composers who probe new territories” to facilitate the “immediate multidirectional flow of musical information across existing national borders” (Kasemets 1967, 14). Graphic notation represented, for Kasemets, a communications media that warranted deeper involvement from performers, new competencies in realizing and translating notational puzzles, and a more haptic sensory engagement in working with non-standard musical technologies.

When I asked Gordon Monahan if audience members were given any kind of introduction to *Counterbomb* at the 1983 concert as a way of setting a context for what was to follow, he said that “Udo was interested in doing it in a way that was anti-show business...an emcee would have been out of the question” (2012). Gayle Young noted that the inherent contradiction between structure and perception in *Counterbomb Renga*, that, for example, “no listener could determine the words Marshall McLuhan were embedded in the acrostics” (2013). Tina Pearson admits that in the end, Kasemets and the organizers probably “didn’t do enough for the listeners when they entered that kind of space” (2012) at the concert, and queried me about my own listening experience with the incomplete archival recording of *Counterbomb*, nearly 30 years after the event. *Counterbomb* resonated with me as both an historical document, as well as a meditation in sound that foregrounds its non-intentionality. This is to say that, following Linda Catlin Smith’s comments on the work’s “natural” co-existence monodies, I heard the *space* of the work more than the work itself—the dimension of perceiving a “sensible” object that, according to Rancière, illuminates the autonomy of experience rather than the autonomy of the artwork itself. My encounter with *Counterbomb* as a material thing, as a sonic echo relaying fragments of the lived experiences of my informants, is only a partial undertaking of the piece’s relational aspects.

Taken in the context of subjective and spatial relationships, *Counterbomb*’s scalability remains, perhaps surprisingly,⁹ its most vital quality. Kasemets had an even grander vision of the work, to make use of the broadcast recording at a later date for a truly international real-time on-air experiment in renga-making, with participants in Europe, Canada, and Japan connected by intercontinental satellite link.¹⁰ A *reduced* version of the work was performed in late 1982 by composer Barney Childs (a long-time acolyte of Kasemets’) at the University of Redlands in California by a student ensemble, and the students’ poems eventually wound up getting enveloped into the larger system of links which made up the Toronto *Counterbomb*. Kasemets himself performed a *solo* version of the work later in 1983 at the Artculture Resource Centre on Queen St. West.¹¹ Reading only the tankostics along with the Chain Chant recording, perhaps Kasemets was trying to test the parameters of the work’s collapsibility. And nearly ten years later, Kasemets revisited the work’s “nuclear” structure again, and adapted it for string orchestra and percussion. *Requiem Renga* was commissioned by the Chamber Players of Toronto, and was a purely musical renga, as its subtitle indicates, dedicated to “the victims of wars and violence of our times.”

Traditional Japanese renga, as Jerome Rothenberg notes, is a practice of collective poetic creation marked by its thematic commands and prohibitions, with rules and strictures that have been formalized and refined over centuries (2011, 773). Its modern successor, *renshi*, emerged in

the second half of the twentieth century as a response to the sudden and violent rupture of postwar Japanese modernity. Renshi, unlike renga, utilizes a projective, formally open structure tied to the freeing of verse in the “upswing of new poetics” since the war (Rothenberg 2011, 770). As a product of this new postwar reality, its practice by modern poets from Japan and elsewhere has been invigorated by experimentations with interdisciplinary and citational manoeuvres, with the “shadow of ancient order somewhere in background” (ibid). Thus, the various Western rengas discussed in this paper, by Kasemets, Cage, and Paz (and company), might better be thought of as the newer, internationalized and living practice of rensi, which is born of the increased global flows of information and people that communications technologies in the last century have accelerated. The inherent fluidity and variability that defines *Counterbomb*, and keeps it from attaining the formal purity associated with renga, accentuates both its ephemerality as well as the transient inflection of its politics.

Yet for *Counterbomb Renga* to have remained important, we must consider that within the fluxes and contours of its mediation, experience, and archiving, there is a resounding material permanence at its heart. That permanence remains manifest in the myriad connections which have appeared to remain intact after three decades. “By threatening life in its totality,” Schell writes in *The Fate of the Earth*, “the nuclear peril creates new connections between the elements of human existence—a new mingling of the public and the private, the political and the emotional, the spiritual and the biological” (1982, 173). That peril, although no longer charged with the immediacy it carried during the Cold War, also remains intact with rapidly destabilizing geopolitical alignments in the West, and the new fault lines appearing in diplomacy between the United States, Russia, and North Korea. As Kasemets observed in 2010: “The whole thing about that bomb is that it is still existing. It is there, everywhere. And we are carrying on, of course, and we are not taking it as an important question about human development. At the same time, it is just as threatening as it was a half century ago.” When I asked Linda Catlin Smith about *Counterbomb*’s political efficacy, she remarked to me, “The work will always be timely as long as there’s war and bombs. I think artists from time to time have to make these kinds of appeals” (2013). Tina Pearson also commented,

Perhaps some kind of re-emergence is propelling us all to think about the core of the piece in a more focused way. It would be quite interesting to see how its tendrils and ghosts might be revisited in this light—not as archival performance, *but as a continuation, or picking up the transmuted threads* (Pearson, email to the author, my emphasis).

The *Fate of the Earth*, *Counterbomb*’s textual “locus of inspiration,” ends in an ambivalent tone. As does Kasemets, Schell seeks guidance in the words of poets to find proper expression:

At present, most of us do nothing. We look away. We remain calm. We are silent. We take refuge in the hope that the holocaust won’t happen, and turn back to individual concerns. We deny the truth that is all around us, we grow indifferent to one another. We drift apart. We grow cold. We drowse our way to the end of the world.... E.M. Forster told us “Only connect!” Let us connect. And Auden told us, “We must love one another or die” (Schell 1982, 230).

As Alan Beaulieu describes, the ethopoetics of the self, which I used here as way of reconciling *Counterbomb Renga*'s impact on Pearson, Monahan, Catlin Smith, Jaeger, "encourages others to care for themselves and to break out of the state of normalization to practice an aestheticization of the self. This 'politico-poetic' is a 'political experimentation' without any pre-defined program" (2006, 34). The breaking out of normalization, an interruption, sets into motion the irreversible processes of connection and articulation that can lead to freedom and love. Beyond any of its various incarnations, *Counterbomb* has proven to be a vehicle for illuminating these connections in strange and unexpected ways. As David Jaeger remarked, "The people who met in the process of doing the work, people who worked together for the first time on the occasion of that work, they tended to mark that occasion as a kind of a singular moment, and in some cases a watershed moment" (2012). Linda Catlin Smith contextualized *Counterbomb*'s lasting impact another way, noting how Kasemets' work has always been concerned with highlighting relations between art forms, imbricating poets, visual artists, and into the purview of his own compositional activity. She notes, "his whole work is linking to other works. It's almost a metaphor for the way he created because his works are always related to other people and other arts" (2013). *Counterbomb*'s relationality reflects a broader topos in Kasemets' oeuvre, one that speaks to art's modular properties, as Rancière notes. Past artworks, writes Rancière, "may fall asleep and cease to be artworks, they may be awakened and take on a new life in various ways. They make thereby for a continuum of metamorphic forms" (2002, 143).

Tina Pearson, in reflecting on how *Counterbomb Renga* might in fact far more elemental, more mutable, told me: "The ripples from that it happened, and that we all actually thought about it for that moment, and that you're now talking about it—*that's* the piece."

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¹ Young, a composer, author, (and former publisher of *Musicworks*) is also an instrument builder. She built the amaranth—a 24-stringed zither-like instrument designed with elements drawn from Lou Harrison’s monochord and Asian stringed instruments—in 1980, to “facilitate composition and performance with unusual tuning systems” (Young 2010).

² Whom Kasemets called his “fundamental source.”

³ And, as Rob Haskins (2009) has identified, in later works such as *Two*².

⁴ *Counterbomb* was the first connection between the two that would go on to result in a personal and creative relationship that lasted until close to Kasemets’ death in 2014.

⁵ My emphasis.

⁶ This letter remains part of Pearson’s personal collection of correspondence with Kasemets, and she read excerpts to me during one of our interviews for this chapter.

⁷ I examine elsewhere in some detail the relationship between McLuhan’s formulation of acoustic space and its impact on Kasemets. See Strachan 2017.

⁸ During the spring and summer of 2010, I interviewed Kasemets several times for related to my PhD thesis.

⁹ I am grateful to David Cecchetto for pointing out the paradox in this statement—that scalability is “anathema” to heterogeneity.

¹⁰ As described in his letter to Pearson, fall 1982.

¹¹ The Artculture Resource Centre (ARC), at 789 Queen St. West, existed in the early 1980s.