

Yan Jun

Hanging out at the space.

While Martijn was living in Beijing, I got to perform his work in a large courtyard, covered in aphid slime, on Black Sesame Hutong. I also performed a work of his one time at the art space Zajia Lab and the vegetable market built out of an old Daoist temple. And then one time at the performance space XP and in the nearby hutongs. I used a digital recorder to record other people's versions of his works, and continued walking through the hutongs making recordings.¹ In addition, I've also seen people performing his work at the spacious exhibition hall at Platform China. I remember that my experience of time was amplified by all those spaces and the structure of all those sounds (different kinds of space).

For the work on Black Sesame Hutong, "during, lasting.. exhibition piece," the sound was different for each performer and for the audience, not only because the performers were at distances from each other, but also because the environmental sound came in from different directions. Some people ignored it, while it fascinated others. Even I felt like the space was different. Before the performance, I walked around the different parts of the courtyard. During the performance, I sat under a tree--and the places I walked before were full of sounds made by other performers. Some sounded louder, some were quieter. I knew it was all relative. So what *is* space? It contains those kinds of relative positions, and it also contains the sounds outside that courtyard. So why did I think the courtyard wall was the boundary of the space?

¹ <https://subjamlab.bandcamp.com/album/truth-exercise-for-a-listener>

In Chinese, space has the fascinating quality of *kong*, or emptiness. If you know a little about Buddhism, you know the weight of this word, which points to its ultimate truth. But space in our world isn't so empty. It might have borders or walls, or is bounded by a river, or it might have area. The most important thing is that it's always connected to an observer, it has an observer's perspective and can also be a locus for listening. Even if we imagine a space independent of any observer, we cannot ignore the limits of our language and thought. For example, it's too difficult for me to understand what quantum mechanics calls the fifth or sixth dimensions, and that's my boundary.

When the Chinese noticed the Big Dipper in the early days of civilization, they called it Taiji--the most fundamental coordinate. Based on that, direction was given to the development of astronomy and agriculture, how to make predictions, how to understand prayers for good fortune and the exorcism of bad fortune, and so on. The concepts of the Five Elements, yin-yang, and the Son of Heaven all related to this ultimate direction. That's to say, space has also been related to naming since the beginning of civilization. The world today originally might not have been much like that, but it's like that. For example, today, the orientation of every house and the position of each table are related to feng shui. I have a friend, Huan Qing, who notes the orientation of the stage for each of his performances. There is a fixed correlation between space and potential energy, and this energy also informs the human body (even if a person is far away from their house, traveling). In other words, space has been made linguistic, and has entered into writing, knowledge, and then the body.

Perhaps an empty space can escape the influence of all these energies and languages. This is related to the practice of Buddhism: in the beginning, practitioners need an empty room, then a quiet retreat, then a state of mind, a state of meditation, and finally the truth. Not only is there no ground, nor is it subject to bodily sensations, nor is it disturbed by thought. But rather than needing an empty space, it's better to reach an emptiness without any space at all. This is a task that seems impossible. But that's exactly what it is.

Music is always related to space. Maybe not be like the early humans at Grotte Chauvet, and maybe not like the people who later played organ in church (both examples are related to spatial acoustics). Even outdoors, people form temporary spaces around music. It might be circular, with the performer in the middle. Or everyone might be the performer. It might be in the style of an ancient Greek drama, with a stage and then, facing it, fan-shaped seating from low to high. It might be in motion, with the performer walking ahead or behind a funeral or wedding procession, possibly walking several miles. The music in these examples has sacred meaning, to some extent. The circular space acts as a protective barrier, and the performance of movement upsets any coagulation of energy—crossing life and death, as well as different spaces.

Another, secular, example: in the famous scroll painting *The Night Revels of Han Xizai* (Gu Hongzhong, Five Dynasties; extant Song Dynasty copy at the Palace Museum in Beijing), different events are presented following the habit of looking from right to left, following chronological order and spatial distribution, and naturally dividing into sections

using empty ground. Every person who plays music or appreciates it forms a semi-open space, and those who enjoy happiness in bed or under the sheets can also hear music and make noises, and these spaces communicate with each other. From an anthropological perspective, a bed and the sheets within the bed frame's railings can be considered a way to avoid hidden energies (including our gazes). The formations of standing and playing in the painting's revels also form arcs, fan shapes, symmetries—all still simulating the circle. However, the art of the scroll itself is a collection, and an unfolding, of space. We can imagine that, as we unroll the scroll, music gradually flows out of its different spaces.

Today, the definition of music is no longer limited to the classical music of Europe (or India, or China, or...), and although the representatives of sacred space, namely musicians, still exist, more spaces have emerged. Experimental music tends towards non-spiritual spaces such as parks, ruins, living rooms, the simultaneous use of multiple stages, musicians distributed amongst an audience, and the free movement of audience members... Performers increasingly incline not to act as agents between physical space and hidden energies—in other words physical space can be secular and does not need authorization from any divine system, and agents do not need wear formal attire (in Chinese, 礼服 *lǐfú* or formal attire implies ceremonial attire) or masks. So, the ubiquitous hidden energy begins to separate from the language. The guardians, symbols, and symbolic systems behind sacred spaces like concert halls are fixed with sets of rules for exchange. At present, gods (and even ghosts) have lost their form and have returned to the primordial chaos.

Experimental music and its spaces have a temporary relationship. Language may no longer rely on writing, but, as with animals, it is transmitted through sound. It is transmitted, together with sound, and returned to its pre-linguistic state. Space opens up its attributes, and its agents also give up their power, to a degree--anyone can also establish their own temporary relationship. Whether this is a good or bad thing may not be important, what's important is that it returns us to daily practice, that is, practices that don't rely on special conditions.

Most existing music moves forward towards an audience, entrusting itself to the audience along with the space they maintain. There are other types of music that move as if in retreat, preferring for the audience to see things beyond it, including the chirping of crickets outside the window and the background noise of electrical currents. Some music is particularly interested in space, allowing the audience to notice reverb and feel the material of the floor. This is also a form of retreating music. The ultimate retreat clears away--for example a system that does not transmit any signals, or an interface with no information flowing in or out, but where the power supply is still connected and affected by voltage, current, and occasional surges in the mains. All devices, including microphones, sound cards, computers, and people, exist as different resistors, and even exist as electromagnetic fields and receivers at a weak scale (including the land and the air). These are not languages, but they are more powerful than language and can be said to have no boundaries (although this is not yet what the Buddhists call emptiness).

Zhuangzi said that the best way to hide a space is to place it within its original place (the original says "hide a world within a world"). I am familiar with daily spaces, and I can often feel when a hidden or newly formed space appears--after my own or someone else's performance begins. And after the performance is over, especially after the audience has left, it disappears again. This is all temporary and possible, even the Big Dipper is temporary and possible.