

Music for Parking Lots

by Samantha Culp

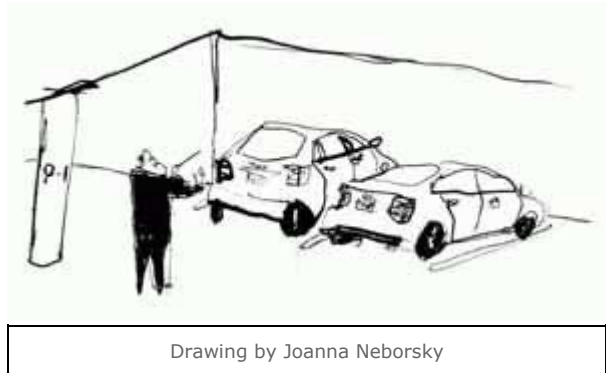
If the streets of Los Angeles were a symphony, the underground parking garage would be the "rest." All day long the freeways and boulevards resound with bass engine rumbles, screeching horn sections and emergency siren arias (not to mention the occasional cacophony of a metal-on-metal cymbal "crash"). In the hushed parking caverns beneath shops and offices, however, concrete insulation provides the mute pedal to the frenzied sonic landscape above. But as the works of John Cage first revealed to the West, silence is only relative, and every silence has its own sound.

Like any pause in a piece of music, the quiet of a parking garage heightens our perception of the delicate notes within it, and through contrast makes it possible to comprehend the greater urban composition as a whole.

The essential liminality of the parking garage has found articulation in Listen Edgemar, a new permanent sound installation by Hugh Livingston and Michael Zbyszynski in the subterranean lot of a Santa Monica shopping complex. At street-level, the Frank Gehry-designed Edgemar development is your average, upscale mini-mall, housing a coffee shop, a chic hair salon, a museum bookstore and a German-fusion restaurant. But in the parking lot below, much more is going on.

Fourteen speakers, mounted in various locations on the concrete ceiling, play different channels of audio selected from sound files and mixed by a computer program. The effect is so subtle that a typical Westsider on the way to a hair appointment might not notice it at first. Scraps of shakuhachi flute, saxophone, cello, sitar, and other clicks, burbles and chirps float around the space, emerging from this speaker and then that, echoing off the flat gray concrete to create a sustained tone, rising, falling, surging in and out. Walking around the dual-level parking area, the listener begins to listen harder. Trying to catch a fragment of horn as it slips away to another speaker, you find yourself listening to a rush of water before realizing it is the plumbing pipes running directly overhead. Next—is that a horn gesture, or the squeal of that Volvo's tires slowly nosing into place? A drum accent or the slam of a car door? Even the creator isn't entirely certain. As a bird call reverberates from a corner, Hugh Livingston chuckles and says: "Hear those? I don't even know if they're real or not."

Though based in Oakland, Livingston is often at Edgemar these days, tweaking the computer program, wandering the space, trying to get it rightly random. The day I visit, he's training an assistant to take care of the installation when he's not there. "So this is the control room," he says, waving to the janitor's closet next to the elevator shaft where we're seated. "They were supposed to build me another cage with a sort of



Drawing by Joanna Neborsky

working monitor..." he trails off, suggesting that this may never materialize. Livingston doesn't seem disappointed in the modest set-up, or is perhaps just too excited by showing off the complex logarithms triggering sound-selection within the computer, and leading us around the space to hear the result of different conditions. He uses the metaphor of "driftwood": a little bit of sound chosen at random by the computer, assigned a trajectory and a speed of repetition, which is dropped into the "cyclonic ring" of the speakers and cycles through them. "Because I've already edited the sound files, I'm just hoping they'll be great combinations of clarinet and sax moving one way, and Indian sitar moving the other way." The majority of the time the piece is running (usually 8am to 10pm), these chunks of aural driftwood spin by a few at a time, and at a fairly low volume, but twice a day, synced to the high and low tides of the ocean at nearby Santa Monica Pier, a special sonic event happens. Livingston overrides the timers to activate one for us, and suddenly the space is filled with sound, less a sprinkling of driftwood than whole logs cramming through a river's neck, spinning out of control. Horns and winds and internally-miked-accordions, oh my. "That was a good one," Livingston beams when high tide is over.

"This is my favorite part, I call it the Fountainizer," Livingston says, stopping beneath one speaker to point out the intensified water sounds (recorded from the actual Edgemar fountain) that curve ahead through other speakers for 32 feet (the exact length of the corresponding fountain upstairs). "I have a collection of trills that people recorded in the studio, along with real fountain sounds, which creates an ongoing warbling." Here again in the Cageian tradition, reality and its echo, music and noise, are difficult to tell apart. For one week the installation was completely shut off for trouble-shooting, but Livingston kept getting compliments from people who had come to listen to an empty parking garage. He couldn't be happier, and jokes that his next installation will be simply a big sign reading, 'Sound Installation,' with no sound besides the natural ambience. "Because it's all music," he says, "All I'm doing is focusing people's listening."

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