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## FIELD NOTES

# THE COMPOSED IMAGE HANNAH WHITAKER AND NOISE

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In the spirit of exploring contemporary photography's place in a broad cultural context, *Field Notes* draws parallels between the photographic medium and technology, science, music and the humanities. In this issue, we discuss elements of chance, repetition, and the everyday in the work of photographer Hannah Whitaker and composers William Basinski and Richard Chartier.

*Imaginary Landscape No. 1*, composed by John Cage in 1939, marks an early milestone in his exploration of extended techniques, a non-traditional methodology used in the pursuit of new or unusual sounds. As a student of Arnold Schoenberg, Cage first encountered a self-described inability to work within the logical structure of musical harmony. His career spans a decades-long proclivity for reimagining the role of instruments and non-musical objects in his work. Hannah Whitaker's recent project borrows the title of this composition and translates Cage's unconventional musical notation into an artist book, also titled *Imaginary Landscape No. 1*. Whitaker's ability to apply Cage's working methods—which have no inherently visual basis—to the creation of photographic imagery is a testament to the legacy of Cage's influence, which spans generations and crosses artistic disciplines.

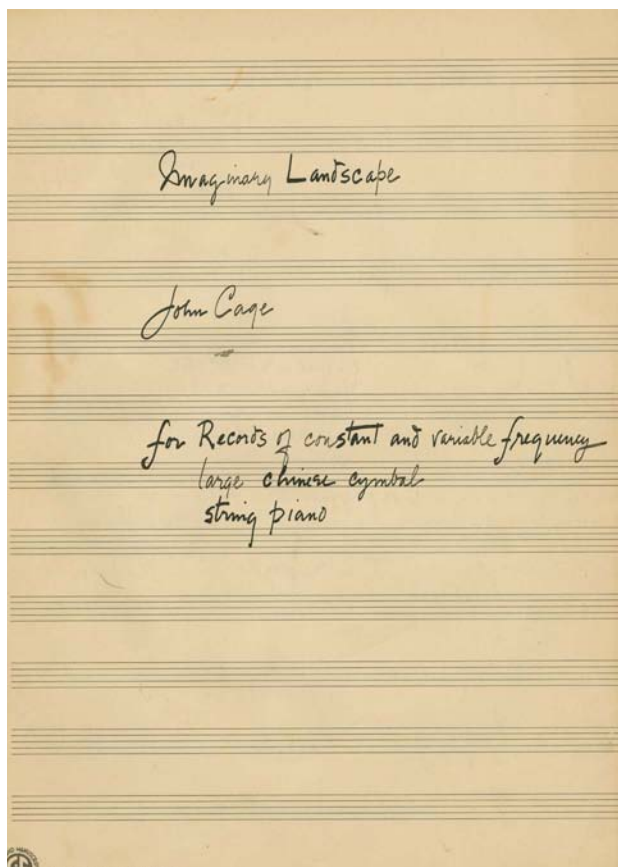
Whitaker's *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* consists of traditional landscape photographs overlaid with pinpoints of light in various geometric configurations. To create this effect, Whitaker constructs hand-made masks, which allow light to leak onto the film's surface during the time of exposure. The specific arrangement of the light patterns Whitaker creates references and visually traces the compositional structure of Cage's original piece. By taking Cage's work as the starting point for her *Imaginary Landscape No. 1*, Whitaker references both the reimagining of the everyday and the deliberate circumvention of logic that comprise Cage's legacy. The format of the book mimics the rhythm of the original composition:

the four phrases are divided into four sections, each separated by a blank spread, which visually suggests an audible pause. The rigor with which Whitaker translates the structured framework of musical notation into her own visual language is critical to her artistic process, but it still leaves room for the element of chance to introduce varying and unexpected results in the final form.

The link to Cage in Whitaker's work is direct but the process of translating his ideas into images requires a healthy dose of creative license, as Whitaker clearly demonstrates. One of Cage's most significant contributions to sound art in particular is his dogged pursuit of the boundaries and margins of the medium and its traditions. Cage's work offers inspiration to the generations of composers who follow him to break the constraints of both medium and format, providing fertile ground for experimentation and the license to do so wholeheartedly. With Cage's ideas and influence as a linchpin, the collaborative work of composers William Basinski and Richard Chartier is born from the same cultivated environment of boundary-bending as Whitaker's work.

Individually, their artistic backgrounds are vastly different: Basinski is classically trained whereas Chartier actively eschews musical theory in his work. The combination of their divergent methodologies—especially viewed in light of John Cage's early struggles with harmony—are reflective of the common ground that exists between structure and dissonance, a balance both Cage

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Orchestra

Victor frequency record 84522 B at 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  R.P.M.  $\frac{84}{100}$  cycles

Victor frequency record 84522 B at 78 R.P.M. 100 cycles

Victor Constant Note record No. 24 (84519 B) at 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  R.P.M. 84 cycles

Victor Constant Note record No. 24 (84519 B) at 78 R.P.M. 84 + cycles

Play on a small turntable provided with a clutch for change of speed. Intervals change with change of rotation.

Play. Mphs indicated by raising and lowering needle.

Victor frequency Record 84522 A  $\frac{84}{100}$  cycles

Play on a small turntable provided with a clutch for change of speed (33 $\frac{1}{3}$  - 78 R.P.M.) Begin at 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ . Thereafter shift clutches with each (x) appearing in score.

This composition is written to be performed in a radio or recording studio. 2 microphones are required. One microphone picks up the performance of players 1 + 2, the other that of players 3 and 4. The relative dynamics are controlled by an assistant in the control room. The performance may then be broadcast and/or recorded.

Large Chinese Cymbal  $\circ$

String Piano  $\text{♩} = \text{♩}$  mute strings with palm of hand to be played very loudly without accents except where indicated.

$\text{♩} = \text{♩}$  Sweep bass strings with gong beater

and Whitaker search for in their own works. Basinski and Chartier's compositions are a form of dialectic favoring intuition over reason, constructed through impulse and improvisation. They describe *Aurora Liminalis*, their second collaborative work, as "the aural equivalent of undulating trails of light" and the album's single, 45-minute track can not be easily labeled as music; it functions more as an extended experience within a carefully constructed aural space.

*Aurora Liminalis* eases open with a spare arrangement of sound forming the firmament upon which the piece rests, with subtle chimes permeating the background. The transition from silence as the album begins is fuzzy and indistinct, and this is a quality that carries throughout the length of the work. The piece progresses and evolves slowly with barely-thawed stillness. Moments of sharp, focused sound are dotted throughout the work and prick through the haziness but immediately dissolve into the background. Layers and loops are collaged in crystalline, overlapping patterns. The overall impression is one of a suspended, glacial churning; we are left with ghostly echoes detached from their source.

It's impossible to describe the work metaphorically; the work doesn't sound "like" anything recognizable. This is a deliberate, if

somewhat unachievable effort. Basinski says, "I am trying to remove the obvious cues in much of my work, but it's an impossibility. Our senses make connections with tangible experiences, memories, etc." The experience of listening is, however, undiminished. Chartier adds that, recognizable or not, "all sound is real. This is why sound interests me. It's not an illusion." What results is a tangible aural space in which the listener is offered a densely ambiguous experience. To draw a stark contrast: there is no element of the guided verse-chorus-verse formula present in most pop music and therefore there is an overwhelming degree of choice in how the work is consumed by the listener. Without being told how to listen, the choice to follow one thread or another is left open. Rather than a rigid set of directions, the listener is offered faded blueprints. Nowhere is this more evident than in the creation of the piece itself, described by Chartier as "an improvisational session, revisited over the years, reworked, recomposed, extracted, pushed, and pulled until we were both happy with it. We do not subscribe to a right or wrong way in process. Things just evolve."

The cyclical nature of all three of these artists' works invites patient and meditative contemplation without the promise of resolution. Their use of loops and repeated imagery raises the possibility that

no two experiences are identical, and small shifts and changes in the work slowly move into the foreground of our experience over time. If an answer does come, it is the realization that what is vital and what is distracting may in fact be the same. Whitaker's work frequently relies on the use of repetition—she often includes multiple variations of the same base composition within a body of work. *Limonene* depicts familiar, everyday objects in unnatural and unusual compositions. As a result, these objects—bottle caps, straws, plastic bags—become unhinged from their intended settings and hang suspended in the picture plane as strange visual echoes of the objects we encounter all the time, distorted by the process of being collected and photographed.

No matter how effectively Whitaker reconfigures the latent meaning in the objects she collects, they are never rendered unrecognizable. Her vision of these objects does not blot out our memory of their former lives. This recycling of cultural material is a form of cyclical repetition—a materialistic loop. As with Basinski and Chartier, the experience of the work lies not in the singular image or sound passage but in the layering and repetition that comprises the work as a whole. Each cycle of the loop, and each variation of the image implies the possibility of a unique vision of the work, each iteration a subtle but distinctly different version than the next.

Layered loops figure heavily in both the individual and collaborative works of Basinski and Chartier. Chartier says, “Early on, I would base everything around a rhythmic track and then by the end the rhythm was completely excised ... so they just became ghost rhythms.” Their work pushes the threshold of the listeners’ perceptions as well. Basinski’s work is at times hazy and subsumed within layers of itself, passages are often looped in overlapping patterns, and individual tones dissolve into one another. Chartier’s work is characteristically reductive, minimalist, electronic, and at times, strangely hyperreal. Despite their seemingly disparate approaches, the work of both artists has the unique ability to push and stretch the experience of time and duration for the attentive listener, offering alternatives to our standard notion of linear time.

Art has the unique capacity to challenge traditional logic and loosen the grip of the technology-driven routine we have imposed on ourselves. It can provide a space to pause and listen to the background noise around us. As artists, Basinski, Chartier, and Whitaker embrace the static and sensory clutter that we might otherwise have ignored. Their use of layering and looping in the work suggests that a brief encounter is not enough, and that patience and duration are more important than a quick read.

The nuanced choreography between Basinski and Chartier stands in stark contrast to our overstimulated environment; we filter out the majority of our sensory experiences in order to navigate through



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04 *Limonene 14*, 201305 *Limonene 38*, 2013



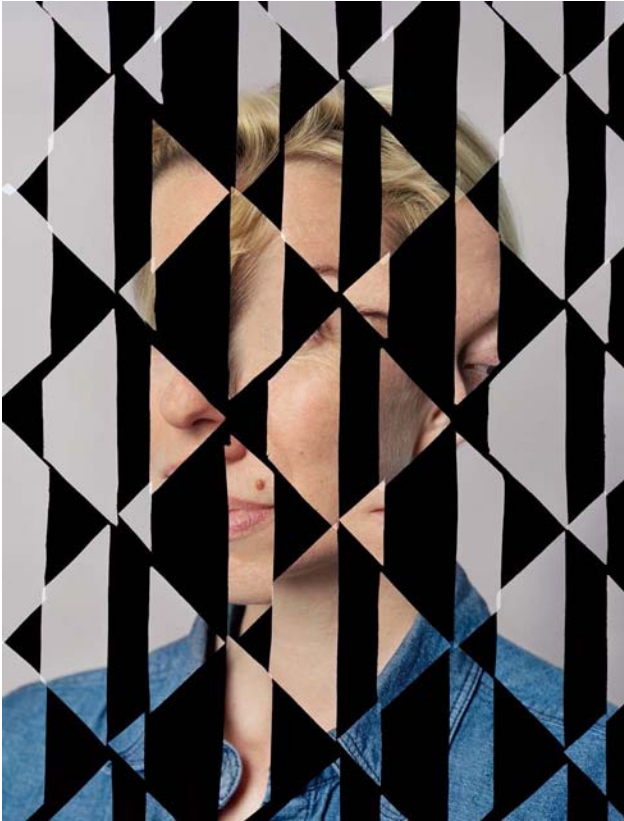


06 *Canon Per Tonos*, 2013

07 *Untitled*, 2013

08 *Limonene 15*, 2013

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our everyday lives. As the rate of sensory exchanges increases, we are more likely to miss or ignore the small changes and background information that linger in the margins of our culture. Basinski and Chartier offer listeners a space to engage at length with subtle and delicate sounds which are increasingly absent from our daily lives. Basinski observes that there is “a growing appreciation for the work, particularly amongst artists, writers, and creative people who need to fall out of time for extended periods.”

Whitaker addresses our hectic post-industrial lives by embracing visual dissonance. Her work explores the tension that exists between order, familiarity, and interruption. She uses systematic—sometimes impenetrable—puzzles that challenge conventional photographic logic and demand thoughtful contemplation. “The work, in its most abstract, is about defying [reason],” she explains. “In essence, noise is a kind of pattern defied.” Whitaker finds a kinship between absurdity and logic by simultaneously inventing and undermining rational systems. This strategy is apparent in works like *Canon Per Tonos*, in which a series of images of photographic screens imply the existence of an object that appears to skirt the laws of physics. Despite being constructed out of simple materials—light, film, and screens—the composition simultaneously confirms and denies



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the photographic capacity for indexical authenticity. As Whitaker points out, this collision “creates an impossible visual realm which is antithetical to what a photograph is supposed to do.”

As sound artists, William Basinski and Richard Chartier are descendants of John Cage, who continues to shape and influence the work of the generations of composers that follow him. His work playfully ignored the boundaries between musical composition and studio art practice. Yet in a broader context, the work of contemporary visual artists like Hannah Whitaker offers testimony to the fact that his influence is scarcely limited to the world of sound. While Cage was a critical player in reshaping the way art operates within the tradition of music, he was, more broadly, a prescient iconoclast who did not subscribe to a clean division between high art and the substance of daily life, a stance which remains vital and relevant across artistic disciplines nearly a century later.





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- 01 *Limonene 26, 2013*
- 02 *Imaginary Landscape: For records of constant and variable frequency, large Chinese cymbal, string piano. John Cage. 1939. Holograph in ink. Courtesy of Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden*
- 03 *Imaginary Landscape No. 1, 2012*



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