

## Sites of Sound, Alchemies of Air: Audiotrope

Clark Lunberry<sup>1</sup>



“Doesn't it seem that the musical structures have become lodged,  
like grammar, in the same connectiveness, leading us always  
back along the same definitions to the same conclusions?  
Couldn't we afford to lose a lot of this purely connective tissue?  
But who wants to face up to a tone, rise and fall?”

-Clark Coolidge

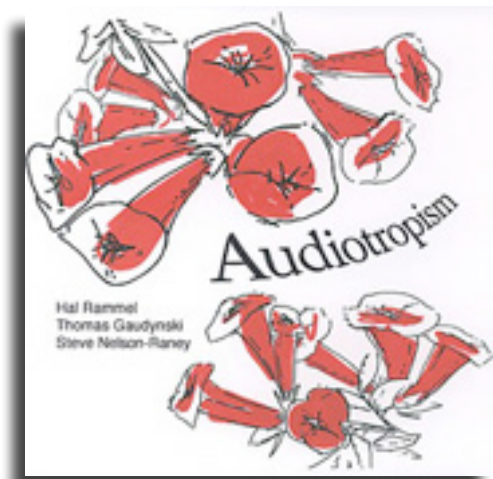
I remember imperfectly a kind of composite of events. I would go to listen to Hal and Steve and Thomas, Audiotrope, as they became known. It was either on Milwaukee's East Side, on Locust Street, in the cramped basement of People's Books, or else over in Riverwest, in the backroom performance space of the much-loved Woodland Pattern Book Center. Either way, either place, I never knew what I was in for, or the sounds I was going to hear. Or even, perhaps, why I was there. Only later was I to learn something of that.

---

<sup>1</sup> This piece was written as the liner-notes for Audiotrope's CD, *Audiotropism* (2004), freely improvised music by Thomas Gaudynski, Steve Nelson-Raney, and Hal Rammel. For additional information about Audiotrope, or the CD, go to this website: <http://my.execpc.com/~penumbra/audiotrope.html>.

*Often at dusk, and a dog at the door, or a bright afternoon, the sun reflecting  
off a wall of words, books from floor to ceiling, empty chairs aligned,  
instruments up front untouched, unmoving, evenings and afternoons  
(untouched) about to begin. Years past; again. Here or there,  
now or then (unmoving). To begin again.*

The musicians walked to the front of the room, took up their positions, picked up their instruments. Quickly then, the performance was underway with little fanfare, just a first simple sound, a kind of signal to someone—to us, to them: one of the musicians would start—blowing or striking or stroking—as if responding to nothing in particular, other than the time on the clock, time to begin. Almost always this initial sound, whether it be by Hal on an invented instrument, Steve on saxophone, or Thomas on electric guitar, would appear tentative and uncertain, almost accidental—seeming to say, “*here we are/are we here*”; an isolated movement into the room—a wave, a wand, a ripple of sound—just inching in, or perhaps, a scratching upon silence’s unseen (but sound) surface.



*Then, it is now—7:30 or 2:00—in the afternoon or evening;  
echoes of memory remembering. Something was underway, is starting to happen.  
Upon a stage that does not see itself, a kind of “poor theater” performing.  
The room beginning to move, towards a touch, a tone, “rise and fall.”  
Squalls of sound, fragments forming and unforming, dislodging.*

After one had begun, the other two would soon follow, but taking their time, taking their turn to join the sound. Watching, one could hear them listening; listening, one could see them seeking out a particular point upon which they might make their move, enter the evening, alter the afternoon. Hesitant, careful (poised and paying attention), they would then place themselves into that already established *first* sound—edging in, folding upon, sliding onto—incrementally escalating the acoustic motions underway; clouds forming.

*As if the air has been altered, winds working their way into the room,  
or a new kind of color created, fluidly forming, mixing metaphors;  
one upon the other, onto and away. Colorists of contained sound.*

*Sounds now slipping into a silence of white,  
or a din of darkening accumulations.*

Fifteen, twenty, thirty minutes into the performance, an unexpected convergence of events might occur (but one could never be certain when, *or if*, it would happen). Each of the musicians had, up to this point, been playing, as if mostly alone, in a kind of isolation of separate sound, separate space; but, with time, these separations would begin to break, blur—the accumulating colors moving towards some merger, some larger conception of themselves. Rising both in volume and intensity, the guitar's sharp and shifting strokes had caught onto the saxophone's now-circular breathings which had already layered themselves onto an accelerating murmur of electrified metal scrapings. Like disparate sound coordinates approaching a common point of compression and collision, these separate sounds now began to twist and tangle amongst themselves, taking on a life of their own, larger and more substantial than each of them in

isolation; the air of the room progressively thickening with the gathering expansions; an ever-tightening mass of visceral density. This cloud of accumulations had formed fast and was now in a kind of holding-pattern, urgently sustaining itself on a sharp edge of heated energy.

*Wire on wood on air. Solid sound; acoustic angles and arabesques of breath.*  
*Time and tone now mirroring each other's progressive projections, generating*  
*and forming their own site of time, their own place of performance.*  
*An agitated stasis, an oasis of held sound breeding itself*  
*into convolutions of ephemeral substance.*

Upon this plateau of compacted sound (one that might last anywhere from two to five to ten minutes), it was as if, however briefly, the musicians themselves were no longer there, had vanished into other attunements. While the individual instruments had ceased to sound like themselves: the saxophone no longer the saxophone, the guitar not the guitar; all of them now newly invented as invisible instruments of air and touch. And there, in that tenuous space, it felt like this collective sound could go on forever (and I often wished it would). But, of course, it wouldn't, and couldn't, as the shape began to shift, its edges eroding, always tapering off as if out of sheer exhaustion; *not* the musicians', but the sounds themselves, collapsing entropically from within.

*A held breath, outwardly present.*  
*Shaping into air as solid as stone.*  
*Expiring into isolations of loss.*

After this brief and fleeting period of elevated energy, the musicians would return to themselves, back alone, listening alone. Having displaced themselves in this larger sound, they now *replaced* themselves in this new location, back at a beginning, but a beginning always elsewhere. Positions shifted by the alchemist's conjurings, the clandestine sound still ringing in my ears. The reaction after these periods of dense accumulation was often, for me, "What was that *thing* just created? What material magic just musically happened here in the room?" For that turbulent event had filled the space, stretching to every corner, enveloping everyone within its enriching tangles of tone and timbre, pitch and volume. And together, we all rose and fell.

*I, too, am elsewhere now...and then, while the basement, the backroom  
are there and not there; upstairs, a dog at the door, still; outside,  
a darkening dusk now darker. Collusions of light, tone into time;  
with the shadowy words on the wall, telling of placement.  
And their traces erasing.*

As improvisation, the sounds arose—and fell—unscripted and fleetingly, as they (by definition) must. The evenings ending, but ending how? The musicians seeming to know that the time had come; concluding without concluding, simply ending as they had simply begun. The musicians, their instruments, had come and gone, vanished and restored into this place of performance. But something of the evening's energy now remains as a memoried residue, fragments of sound lost and found; echoing still, a stillness echoing. Caught on tape, contained as particles of memory, like the faintest of reflections digitally fixed, beckoning into their own

lost longing. Encouraging now memory's own improvisations, recollections as *re*-collections of the evenings, the afternoons, and their sounded sites of time and touch, their alchemies of air expiring.