

Science Non-Fiction: 2020

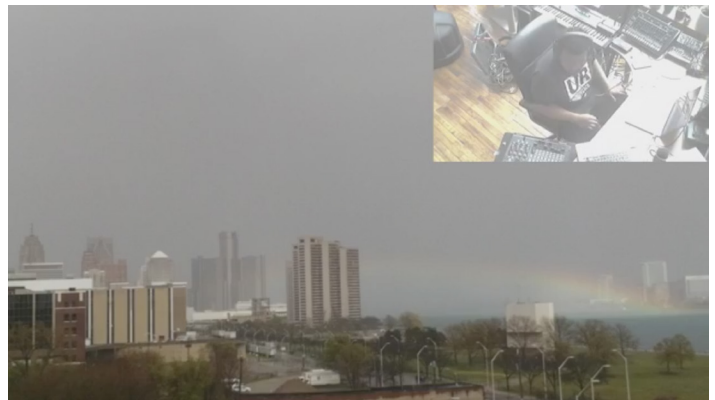
Ashley Cook

May 25, 2020

This global state of existence is unprecedented. Some of us have been able to get through the psychological chaos that comes with it all; somehow. Thanks to the pre-exposure to scenes that make what we are experiencing in present time feel somewhat familiar, scenes that have been delivered through cultural entertainment sources like war movies, apocalyptic thrillers and science fiction novels, we have been consistently desensitized until the real thing occurs and we are like “oh, seen this before”. It brings up this one very familiar and hilarious question...does art imitate life or does life imitate art? I wonder, though, if the kind of art that we rely on the most is the kind that can use the current state of life to imagine the most raw, worst case future scenarios and paint a picture of how these scenarios could be handled, serving as a sort of prerequisite to learning how to exist and adapt in this ever changing and challenging reality. Despite these preventative prescription medications in the form of cultural entities, it is still so shocking when these stories finally become the fabric of reality wrapping our existence, because somehow, it feels both more grounded, and even more surreal than could ever be imagined by an author, director or artist. Maybe because it is so hard to accept that we actually need to adapt, as well as collectively survive, in a society where division and singularization is the norm; it is these most desperate moments that truly highlight how this dog-eat-dog mentality that we have been sustaining has led to a society that is bizarre, scary, and sad.

Covid-19 has required social distancing and quarantine to flatten the curve and allow the hospitals to keep up with the tens of thousands of cases flooding their facilities. Humans have been physically separated from each other to avoid contracting and spreading the Coronavirus, which has been

known to fatally arrest the functioning of the lungs or cause sudden heart attacks, among other things. As the human species learns to exist and continue to stay alive during these times, it is interesting to observe how this has significantly altered modes of interaction and communication. In person, it has been minimal, and even in these moments, there is the impersonal presence of the mask, covering half of the face. There is also, of course, an underlying caution, or even fear, of that other person, even if they are family or a close friend. A fear that they may have it; that they may give it. As a result, there has been an increase in the reliance on the Internet for connectivity, as if physical bodies have been put on the back burner to give way to increased use of thoughts and ideas; brains connecting to other brains as computers are connected to other computers. Especially in this new landscape, where our routines have become suddenly broken, our sense of time has become increasingly abstracted, our finances and our stability has become compromised, and collectively, humans are going through an existential crisis as a species, they have been searching the Internet to seek any sense of connection with their fellows, to seek a sense of normalcy. With change comes pain, but an age old philosophical point of discussion entertains the idea that deconstruction does not only lead to death, but also to new poetics, new solutions and new ways of seeing the world around us. Despite the desolation out there in the physical world, slowly the resilience of culture is exposing itself once again, through the sprouting of new initiatives to sustain what time together until now has built. It is interesting to slowly stumble across these initiatives as they begin, and to observe how they evolve.

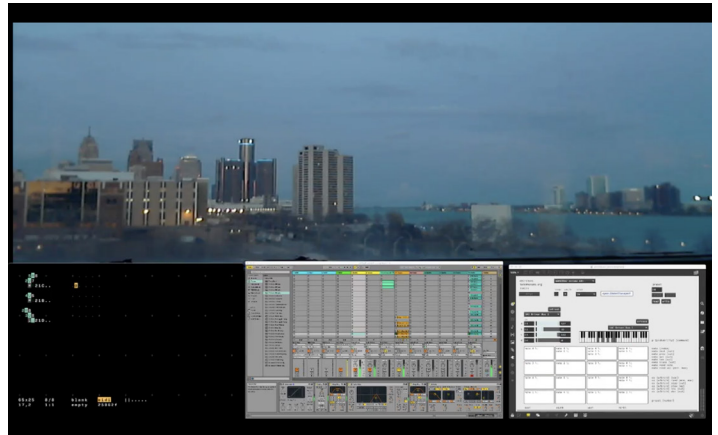


Speech Sounds Live © Photo by Ashley Cook

Among the newest array of online zoom meetings and virtual dance parties, in the ether of the net, exists a 115 minute ambient music set weaved intermittently with a reading of Octavia E. Butler's *Speech Sounds*. Composed by Perlex, *Speech Sounds Live* was presented as part of the BLDG:01 live streaming project called Stille. The airy vibe of the encouraging melody and layered sounds, like wind or a machine working slowly with a steady rhythm, could stimulate inspiration to invent or create; this piece almost feels as though it could be the soundtrack to a hopeful scene in a science fiction film. Anti-climactic in nature, this nearly two hour track is for long-term listening and good for meditation. The textural layers of sound could be appreciated by those passively or actively listening, encouraging a sense of calm or contemplation. There is, of course, quite a bit of significance to the utilization of *Speech Sounds* as part of the work, as it is a story that was set in Los Angeles, in post-apocalyptic times, that introduces us to a world in which a pandemic has caused almost all humans to lose their ability to read, speak, or write. For many of the humans in this reality, the impairments are accompanied by uncontrollable feelings of jealousy, resentment, and rage towards those that have been less affected. In utilizing these words that were originally published in 1983, Perlex brings her voice to the present moment as a relevant tone, participating in the continual revival of her work as themes, circumstances and perspectives surrounding her writing continue to become increasingly relatable. As her words become an audio material of their own, they interact with the composition as if an instrument, weaving in and out, taking center stage, then becoming background to the sounds around it.

The set also visually incorporated a live feed of the Downtown Detroit skyline from his apartment window and in the upper right hand corner, a surveillance type camera feed of him as he performed the music live on May 10, 2020. The emotional impact of the quarantine has been undeniable; sometimes it is even easy to forget that as we are isolated in our homes, with many of us struggling with feelings of loneliness and disconnectedness, so is literally everyone else in the world. The dynamic at play through these virtual methods of connecting is interesting in that they can feel both intimate and impersonal simultaneously; despite the plastic feeling of interacting with the world through a computer

screen, it is also a way to share with each other the more intimate spaces of our lives. Through the seemingly conscious choices made to the set up of the visual component of *Speech Sounds Live*, Perlex was visibly present working at his desk alongside a display of his personal view of Detroit city, streaming it in real time, capturing the changes in the weather as time goes on, and allowing anyone in the world to share this view with him, and to maybe even feel that they are there in Detroit too, for at least that time being. It seems like maybe seeing people in real time, even through a computer screen, means more today than it has in the past because the circumstances are so dire; it comes with a sense of relief and appreciation to know those in our community are doing well. The combination of the ambient music, with the reading and the carefully constructed visuals presents a new way of storytelling through the generation of a soundtrack and visual environment to accompany the narrative. In a way, there are two stories being told simultaneously, that of Octavia Butler, and that of our own story in 2020, with each story complimenting and fueling the relevance of the other.



Generative Ambient Sketch 4/9/20 © Photo by Ashley Cook

As an extension of the live set for BLDG:01, Perlex has also released ambient experimentations that incorporated what looks like a screen share of the interface of a music program. *Generative Ambient Sketch 4/9/20* is fast in pace with a heavy drum track and a light and gentle rhythm dancing on top; this particular track seems to be headed in a steady direction, knowing where it is going, moving forward with some kind of mission. The steady drum track holds down the seriousness and keeps a sense of presence and grounding, as the sound on top allows for a floating sensation, an unknow-

ing, openness to things as they come. Abrupt ending or just a clip? It is literally just a 2 minute sketch, but the display is refreshingly transparent, to those who know how to read an interface like that, in that it seems to share the operations of the gadgets as they were being manipulated throughout the track.

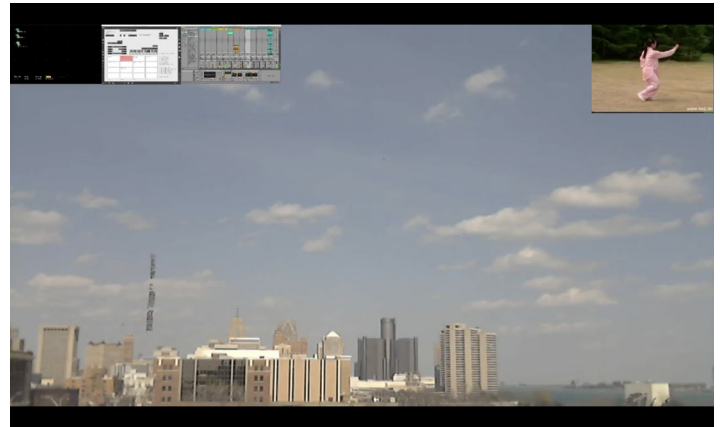


Generative Ambient Sketch at Sunset Detroit, MI 4/11/20

© Photo by Ashley Cook

The series of generative ambient sketches, and particularly *Generative Ambient Sketch at Sunset Detroit, MI 4/11/20* was inspired by *The Disintegration Loops* by William Basinski. *The Disintegrations Loops* were recorded in 2001 when various tapes of Basinski's music began to disintegrate as the iron oxide particles turned to dust, leaving the tape filled with bare plastic spots. As Basinski recorded the tapes, they slowly disintegrated, leaving only silence as the bare plastic remained. The process of recording this music took place in New York City just a few days before September 11, 2001 and Basinski saw this coincidence as an opportunity to compose a poetic assemblage; he chose to present the recordings for the first time on the rooftop of his home on 9/11 while filming the smoky skyline of the city, shortly thereafter, combining the two and releasing *The Disintegration Loops* as a cohesive work.

As a software developer working on building different instruments, Perlex has also been experimenting with a program that allows music to be influenced by a video being played. This software was designed to act like a digital theremin that someone would be able to use live with a web-cam, but it can be used with videos too.



Generative Ambient Sketch 4/11/20 © Photo by Ashley Cook

Included in *Generative Ambient Sketch 4/11/20* is a small video in the upper right hand corner of a person doing Tai Chi, influencing the music being played to allow for nearly perfect synchrony between the two. As the music and the video are interdependent, the person doing Tai Chi somehow resembles a small ballerina in a jewelry box, dancing in a steady and methodical sequence, slowing as the music slows, and speeding up with the music as if wound back up again.

You can access *Speech Sounds Live* by Perlex on Stille by BLDG:01 here:

<https://www.facebook.com/bldg01/videos/256504908885998/>

And links to other projects involving Will Lawson (Perlex) here:

<https://soundcloud.com/perlex>

<https://soundcloud.com/gallons>

<https://soundcloud.com/fullfrontal>

<http://humanresourcesgroup.net/>

runner