

EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT is a 40-minute long piece for voice, string and film, which was written by Jennifer Walshe in 2016, commissioned by the Internationales Musikinstitut Darmstadt (Germany), Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (UK), Wundergrund Festival (Denmark), November Music (Netherlands) and the Onassis Cultural Centre (Greece), which is also the order in which the piece travelled throughout Europe, with further stops at MaerzMusik and other festivals. It was written for the Ardittis ... or with the Ardittis, according to Walshe's own words:

"The initial sessions that I had with the quartet were just free improvisation. I went over to Irvine's house and we all improvised together in his studio."<sup>1</sup>

As the title already suggests, there is a notion of anti-hierarchicality of perception at play in the conception of the piece. What is the piece about?

"EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT is, as a philosopher would put it, a way of thinking 2016 – what it's like to be alive right now ..."<sup>2</sup>

So the piece is about everything. It exhibits a certain claim on a totality, on a flatness of perception in our relationship to media and the inevitable connectedness of everything. But of course it is not about everything, it is about *something* and to speak with Donna Haraway: "Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something."<sup>3</sup>

So if there's one theme that is going through the piece it I would like to identify the theme of *the human condition in the anthropocene under "disaster capitalism,"* playing out as the ecological catastrophe through climate change, the meditation of pervasive technology (internet) through the 'control state', as well as huge financial inequalities. However, not everything element in the piece is *equally* important, and the anti-hierarchicality only goes so far, and in that sense, Walshe's concept doesn't seem to translate into her instrument writing. In certain passages it seems that her compositional efforts prioritize video/voice, whereas the strings are reduced to accompaniment, merely 'tagging along', so to speak.

While the material, stemming from a variety of sources, has been somehow "tailored" to the string quartet's specific instrumentation, it seems to be of an almost higher semantic importance, that a quartet like the Ardittis, otherwise known for more complex and traditional New Music, could be employed for such theatrical and performative material. It's almost as if the Arditti Quartet and its reputation and status in the "modernist" new music scene as such have become material in a more or less postmodern collage.

The **instrumentation** and setup is relatively straight-forward: the string quartet is seated traditionally and they are all amplified. The voice is amplified with a vocal microphone and a backstage megaphone (or a second vocal microphone, if not available). The film is projected on a screen behind or above the musicians and has sound. Because of the amplification and position of the performers and the audience, the piece enacts a certain flatness of perception also on a sonic level. There is not much depth, acoustically and spatially. It is very much a 'frontal' piece.

There is an extra part for the light, which is timed with the score. In that sense, EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT is very much a 'stage piece' using all that is available at the 'stage.' It remains an open

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<sup>1</sup> HCMF Interview with JW

<sup>2</sup> HCMF Interview with JW

<sup>3</sup> DH: Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene. e-flux Journal #75, September 2016

question why Walshe decided to make this piece so ‘frontal’ and ‘proscenium’-like, especially since the materials and subject matter of the work could invite for much more of an immersive experience or an interactivity, that would break the ‘fourth wall.’

So what is the **form/format** of this work? Walshe herself coined the term “The New Discipline” and spoke about it at length also in this magazine (MusikTexte No. 149). To repeat the main points here briefly in her own words: The New Discipline are “compositions which have a wide range of disparate interests but all share the common concern of being rooted in the physical, theatrical and visual, as well as musical.”

“what is at stake is the idea that all music is music theatre. Perhaps we are finally willing to accept that the bodies playing the music are part of the music, that they’re present, they’re valid and they inform our listening whether subconsciously or consciously. That it’s not too late for us to have bodies.”<sup>4</sup>

“is it music? music theatre? composed theatre? performance? music with visual elements? visual music? opera? musical? instrumental theatre? live art? performance art? performative actions? physical actions?”<sup>5</sup>

Maybe question of format is not “what is it?”, because one any of the above terms can be applied to EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT. Walshe herself argues for it to be called simply “music.” What is obvious is that it transgresses fixed notion of form/format, that it is decidedly ambiguous, manifold and oscillating between formats/genres.

Looking at the score package of EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT, Walshe uses a wide spectrum of media to convey her compositional thought: from straight-up notation, to sound examples that come with the score, to pictures and videos of gestural motions, to inspirational pictures in the score for context ... And for the voice there’s additionally a collection of sound examples (mostly field recordings and what she terms ‘sourced sounds’) that serve as basis for improvisations of the voice. The score is synchronized to the video with a timeline, and the performers have a stopwatch/monitor. The entire score is divided into sections with clear time frames. Some sections are written out entirely, but more often Walshe doesn’t ‘compose through’ the section but specifies only a seed, a principle, or a behavior that the performers the execute over a specified time.

I would argue that there are at least (2) different temporalities at work:

- 1) time as line, arrow, upon which events are firmly located (static/‘neutral’ time)
- 2) time not as line, but more as a principle, time as a behavior of music (dynamic/‘actualized’ time) — or possibly more interestingly inverted— a musical behavior that emits time, through which we are able to perceive time (in a certain way). To speak with Timothy Morton: “... time emanates from objects, rather than being a continuum in which they float.”<sup>6</sup>

Another possibly interesting aspect of the score is its verticality. Compared to the left-to-right trajectory of traditional scores, the verticality reminds of a browser scroll on the internet. Is our perception of temporality different when we read left-to-right vs. top-to-bottom?

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<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Walshe: *The New Discipline*, Borealis Festival

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Walshe: Editorial MusikTexte 149

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Morton: *Hyperobjects*, 132

The score exhibits various degrees of fixedness resp. openness but most of the string writing is more determined than it seems on first glance. The notation for the voice however is more like a rough script for her own performance practice, and the few remarks on 'how' to perform the voice part is sometimes totally ignored by Walshe herself performing it. This co-creative aspect of the piece makes obvious that the material has either been developed together with the Ardittis before the score was written, or actualized during the rehearsals with the composer. In that sense it may be more accurate to not to speak of 'rehearsals' but rather of the 'production' of the piece.

For the text-based guided improvisations Walshe uses a mixture of technical descriptors with very evocative, poetic imagery, which is successful in that it provides concrete steps and guides for realization and actualization, as well as poetic imagery that invites inventive exploration of the given musical terrain. Sometimes however, the length at which she goes to evoke poetic imagery falls behind on what the actual complexity of the musical result is (for example: "Lagrange Point" scratching in the viola p. 36 of the score<sup>7</sup>).

Using a clock as synchronization method in chamber music is quite crude: rhythmic complexity between video/electronics on the one hand, and performers on the other, is almost impossible. Even voice and strings don't seem to communicate much during the performance. This kind of setup doesn't allow very much chamber musical interaction. Similar to our society, individuals seems to run along on parallel, independent streams synchronized with a 'master' clock. The result is a more texture-based, 'flat' music.

In the best post-modern, post-internet, post-whatever tradition, the content and sources for EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT are a complex collage of a wide variety of materials. In the strings one can find direct quotes (Praetorius, Beethoven), mutilated / transformed / recomposed quotes (Barber, Beethoven, "epic guitar solo" violin p. 17) and her own 'writing' – mostly for improvisation 'seeds' ("One of the first people" strings p. 43). In the voice most of the text was written (or compiled) by Walshe: "I sourced a lot of the text from all over the web" ... "the internet has done weird and amazing and crazy and stupid things to text and to language ... people are trying to name emotions that they have and express a new way of feeling about something"<sup>8</sup>

In addition there are quotes from Morton's *Hyperobjects*, from writer Alphonso Lingis and from The Bureau of Linguistical Reality, which "is a public participatory artwork by Heidi Quante and Alicia Escott focused on creating new language as an innovative way to better understand our rapidly changing world due to manmade climate change and other Anthropocenic events."<sup>9</sup> One example of these terms is the "Netflixalypse – that's the feeling that the apocalypse is impending, but it's happening slowly so people are bored and watching Netflix as they wait for things to play out"<sup>10</sup>

The video material consists of two types: footage filmed by Walshe herself, and 'sourced' footage, namely stock footage from large commercial online libraries like Shutterstock. The latter is a sample library, large stockpile of data with imagery concerning every part of 'our' life under modern

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<sup>7</sup> The score is published online at [bura.brunel.ac.uk/bitstream/2438/13768/1/Fulltext.pdf](http://bura.brunel.ac.uk/bitstream/2438/13768/1/Fulltext.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> HCMF Interview with JW

<sup>9</sup> their homepage

<sup>10</sup> JW HCMF

capitalism. The fact that Walshe uses material from Shutterstock is always visible as print over the imagery (see image below).



The reference to Shutterstock seems sometimes more important as the imagery itself. Its vast archives of imagery for every conceivable situation in our lives depicts every aspect of human life in very generic ways. This imagery is readily available for purchase, depicting “zombie” experiences, i.e. experiences that are intentionally neutralized as to fit a variety of contexts. It is specifically a-contextualized imagery, without history, name(s) and/or positionality. Shutterstock footage is a recurring theme throughout the entire piece. It talks about ‘oppressive disaster capitalism’ in that it provides a canvas for us to fill in our emotions into the prefabricated emotional blanks provided and created by fake (‘corporate’) inclusivity, showing us the ‘perfect’ modern, happy life, the glossy, picture book version of the human condition in our late capitalism. Prototypical for this is the stock footage around selfies with their excitement about the ‘prophecy’ of technological progress.

EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT consists a prologue (3 very short, extremely dense sections), 14 sections and 3 interludes. Its texts, film and music cover a wide variety of topics and it is impossible to name any ‘one’ topic for each section. A major influence on the work is Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects*. “Hyperobject” is the name given by Timothy Morton (2010, 2013) to a ... phenomena and/or entities that, according to him, defy our perception of time and space because, among other things, they persist and produce effects whose duration enormously exceeds the individual and collective scales of human life, not to mention (quite plausibly) the duration of the species. Examples of hyperobjects are radioactive materials and other kinds of industrial waste, as well as global warming and the transformations that will follow from it, which can last for thousands or millions of years until the conditions known today are re-established.”<sup>11</sup> Important in this context is the idea that our awareness of hyperobjects brings about the “end of the world” as a coherent system as we know it.

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<sup>11</sup> Excerpt From: Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, p. 62

One paragraph in *Hyperobjects* was of particular significance for Walshe: “I had Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects* within 10 feet of me for most of the composition process and he gives this wonderful description of DNA microarray machines, and solar radiation and zombies, which anchored the piece for me on some levels.”

“Without a world, there is no Nature. Without a world, there is no life. What exists outside the charmed circles of Nature and life is a charnel ground, a place of life and death, of death-in-life and life-in-death, an undead place of zombies, viroids, junk DNA, ghosts, silicates, cyanide, radiation, demonic forces, and pollution. My resistance to ecological awareness is a resistance to the charnel ground. It is the calling of the shaman to enter the charnel ground and try to stay there, to pitch a tent and live there, for as long as possible....people are dying everywhere. There is blood and noise, equipment rushing around, screams. When the charm of world is dispelled, we find ourselves in the emergency room of ecological coexistence.”<sup>12</sup>

Other topics include the urban biome, urban decay, impeding ecological catastrophe, survivalism (so called ‘preppers’), conspiracy theories (chemtrails in particular), the control state (e.g. the anti-surveillance makeup), migration, heteronormativity, healthism, consumerism/trash, advancements in biotechnology, political/corporate propaganda and life under “oppressive disaster capitalism.”

One of the key features of this piece is what we might call ‘multi-attentiveness:’ There is text in the voice in front of a film, with multiple film and text overlays inside the film. The result is that the audience is faced with a *texture* of elements competing for attention. “The piece is concerned with the texture of life in 2016”<sup>13</sup> I would argue that on a structural level this piece makes successful use of the *texture* of our current media reality, its flatness of perception, its multi-attentiveness. The way information is presented, consumed and processed through technology (namely internet, but also TV, advertising, etc.) is reflected in the way the audience perceives jagged simultaneity of several strands of narration of EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT. The texture of life becomes the texture in this piece. But whether or not this piece manages to critically engage us or merely replicates this reality is a different question.

I would like to briefly take a look at prologue in a more detailed way, to exemplify how the subjects matters manifest in various ways in Walshe’s compositional practice. The prologue is especially useful for this as its density points to many themes and all elements, voice, strings, film and text overlays, are present.

In the beginning, Walshe’s voice is yelling excitedly “The drone is coming in and they’re SMILING! The drone is coming in to take a picture and the investment bankers are SMILING! They’re SMI-“ while the strings are playing, what is termed “INSPIRATIONAL CORPORATE STRING MUSIC”, a very mundane open G hoqueting melody that shifts to C Major. Why and how does this qualify as “inspirational” and “corporate”? Let’s first look at the harmony: It starts with an open G chord (not major, minor), or speaking in corporate music terms: neither “happy” nor “sad”. We could describe it as a “state of possibility”. From this state of openness the harmony moves somewhat forcibly (because not G7) into C-Major, which in corporate music terms would be “happy” or “positive”. This type of forced positivity could be aligned with neoliberal marketing strategies/powers, along the lines of

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<sup>12</sup> Timothy Morton: *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*

<sup>13</sup> – JW HCMF Interview

Byung-Chul Han, who describes our society as being “poor of negativity” and speaks of the “violence of positivity”<sup>14</sup>. The rhythm with its hoqueting, forward motion, with its sense of directionality could be aligned corporate propaganda and euphoria of technological progress. The abrupt cut right in the middle of the phrase points to music entirely as “tool”, as a commodified object in a neoliberal throw-away culture.

The voice sounds more like an over-ecstatic press reporter, reporting on the advent of new technology. The text is a ‘sourced’ (rewritten / taken) article on Vice.com

“To conclude, Lockett—the Rolls Royce burner—demonstrated that the development of the internet and the blockchain are not only spiritually correct, but deeply natural. Nature too is organized in networks. As proof, he showed pictures of networks of mushrooms next to visualizations of social media networks. The applause was frenetic. During a short pause, the participants gathered on the giant chess terrace for a 3D group picture. As the picture-snapping drone approached from the blue skies, everyone raised their arms in a group cheer.”<sup>15</sup>

The drone is coming and people are smiling... This is reversing an association with drones if you remember that drones were developed military to “rain hell-fire from the skies” (John Stewart) and to do surveillance tasks among others. In most places on this earth people don’t smile when drones are approaching. In this context, these feared, lethal war machines are turning into cheered, revered collaborators. But for who? Investment bankers – i.e. capitalists constituting the highest income group, that are also representing the most aggressive form of capitalism. This exposes the double function of machines: They are cheered and revered collaborators/toys for privileged global elites, and lethal war machines against most disenfranchised people.

While all this is happening, the film scans over a collection of used, half empty, dirty window cleaner bottles, which give the impression of pink, very plasticky, trashy feeling and point to consumerism, plastic trash, environmental disaster. “ ‘What will survive of us is love’, wrote Philip Larkin. Wrong. What will survive of us is plastic ...”<sup>16</sup>

On top of this is a text overlay in silvery, 90s 3d web-style aesthetics presenting 3 terms: 1. “Apex guilt”, taken from “The Bureau of Linguistical Reality”, describing “the deep understanding that humans are the apex predator on this planet”<sup>17</sup> 2. “Context” which are “the circumstances that form the setting for an event” (New Oxford Dictionary). The setting in this context is the Anthropocene. and 3. “Collapse”, which points to the economic, ecological, political, social, spiritual, etc. melt-down of disaster capitalism.

The prologue in its extreme density points to the violence of positivity in neoliberal capitalism, technological euphoria and its double function (lethal, entertainment), to consumerism and trash, to the huge financial & power inequalities and to sensational reporting (mass media).

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<sup>14</sup> Byung-Chul Han: *The Burnout Society*, p. 11–12

<sup>15</sup> Hannes Grassegger: *My Wet and Wild Bitcoin Weekend on Richard Branson’s Island Refuge*, vice.com

<sup>16</sup> Robert Macfarlane: *Generation Anthropocene: How Humans Have Altered the Planet Forever*, theguardian.co.uk

<sup>17</sup> bureauoflinguisticalreality.com

The very end of the piece takes on the topic of apocalypse, and a quote from Donna Haraway may help illuminate it. “In the traditions of “Western” science and politics—the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other—the relation between organism and machine has been a border war.

“In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture. We have all been colonized by those origin myths, with their longing for fulfillment in apocalypse.”<sup>18</sup>

In her words apocalypse has been and is fantasy of oppressive disaster capitalism and its protagonists. The very end of the piece shows two text overlays, first stating: “THEIR FANTASY WAS ALWAYS THE APOCALYPSE” and ending with “CLAIM IT”.

While the film shows these texts, Walshe’s voice is repeatedly screaming “Geronimo!!!”. Geronimo was a prominent leader and medicine man from the Chiricahua Apache tribe, and an important leader in battle and (eventually helpless) resistance against US and Mexican military campaigns. Ironically, “Geronimo” now is also used by American soldiers especially with military parachutists when they jump out of an airplane as a sort of emboldening battle cry.

The demand to claim our apocalypse, with the helpless, subverted battle cries of Geronimo, leaves us with no easy answer. This combination invokes resistance, but also the subversion of resistance, showing us the double nature/impossibility of resistance in a seemingly (and actually) impossible fight to win against the combined powers of disaster capitalism.

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<sup>18</sup> Donna Haraway: *Cyborg Manifesto*