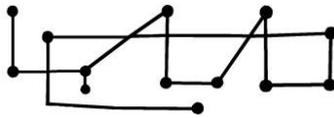


# THE MUSIC OF ELLEN C. COVITO: AN INTERVIEW WITH YOU NAKAI



ELIZABETH HOFFMAN

NO COLLECTIVE AND Panoply Performance Laboratory (NYC) presented a concert, “The Music of Ellen C. Covito,” on May 24, 2012 at Vaudeville Park (an indoor performance space in Brooklyn). This interview, with You Nakai, organizer of No Collective (NYC), focuses on the May 24 performance event, but it also includes discussion of No Collective itself. The interview took place on June 25, 2012. Ellen C. Covito (1974) has lived in Buenos Aires throughout her life. Her scores are available on these sites:

<http://uploaddownloadperform.net/EllenCCovito/Index>

<http://ellencovito.com>

As she writes, it is interesting to note, in the third person (<http://ellencovito.com/biography.html>):

Covito realized that the fundamental issues of music were formally no different from those of ecology (or of feminism, for that matter): the endless process of setting and erasing dichotomies, of differentiating what belongs to one side (“us”) and not to the other (“them”), and of effacing even that difference so that “we” could have more and more. A mechanism that obviously resonates with the political violence that surrounded her childhood.

In the recent years, her focus has become clearer, and her tactics more lucid. Her works now specifically attack the problematic (too easily dismissed but actually not so easily dismissible) dichotomy between composition and improvisation. She does this by introducing distance between the performer and what is performed, while removing the distance between the act of composition and performance.

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Covito’s concept of ecology, arising early in the interview, is idiosyncratic. Her compositions are indisputably disruptive to the fixed conceptual structures of how we make music. But Covito is an absolute structuralist according to her own statements. She views the composition/improvisation pair as a dichotomy to start with. After attending the performance described above, I had a vague impression of Covito as a mildly provocative musical version of Maria Abramovic. In Covito’s compositions, there were tests, dares, and limits to be transcended. But there was also a lot happening musically. The sounds themselves were actually freed of their normal constraints. For me, this was one of the strongest aspects of the event.

#### SPACES AND SCORES

ELIZABETH HOFFMAN: Can you tell me something about the nature of Covito’s scores?

YOU NAKAI: All of her scores are instructions on how to compose scores as well as how to set up the actual performance situation within which those scores are read and performed.

HOFFMAN: So you hadn't seen any video of these performances?

NAKAI: Covito has a web site but she doesn't record her concerts in any way. We had an exchange because first we were going to do the performance at the Issue Project Room. The curators were interested, but they wanted some kind of document from previous concerts. So I contacted her, but she wrote to me saying, "I always thought recording doesn't do justice to my music. None of my 'compositions' result in the same sound because they are, at the same time, always 'improvised' in performance. A recording, then, can only emphasize the 'composed' aspect of my works, which is a false representation."

HOFFMAN: Let's move to a question I have about the space itself. How particular are the performance space demands made by Covito's works? One of the things that impacted me at Vaudeville Park was a feeling of being so immersed in what was happening.

NAKAI: We ended up doing most of her works in one single concert, but they were written separately and of course can be performed separately on different programs. So the answer to this question depends on the piece. For example, there is a piece, "Composed Improvisation G," which we did on the second half of the concert, where there is a score whose pages are glued together, and it has to be ripped open by the performers during the performance. And that piece can be performed on a stage, in a regular concert setting. But, one piece that *does* necessitate a space without a separate stage is the floor-score piece. . . .

HOFFMAN: The audience had to see the floor. . . .

NAKAI: The instructions for that piece, "Composed Improvisation M," state clearly that you have to make a score which is the same size as the floor of the venue, and that it should be a venue without a separate stage or risers. It should be a flat space. And although the instructions don't specify for the piece to be in a small space, the smaller it is, the easier to make the score. [Laughter.]

But as you say, there was something meaningful about the size of that space specifically for the concert we organized. For instance, we decided to have the floor-score of "Composed Improvisation M" open from the start. That was the last piece in the program, so all the other pieces were performed on top of that score. Then "Composed Improvisation M" consisted of all the performers playing all the notes that were visible on the floor-score, and then folding the score in half,

and then keep folding it until we could fold it no more. So in the end, the whole floor-score gets reduced to this tiny bundle of fabric. . . .

HOFFMAN: That's really beautiful.

NAKAI: And that's how we ended the concert. So, in that sense, for our program, that space worked.

HOFFMAN: Some of the pieces, especially the ones with a lot of body movement, seemed to me very sensitive to their particular spatial implementation. For example, if an audience member were to view them as a two-dimensional plane, which is what it would look like on stage, that viewer would miss a lot of the movement dynamics. But, it's also more "dangerous" for the audience, in some of the pieces, to be right there.

NAKAI: Dangerous?

HOFFMAN: I don't mean "dangerous," as in dangerous to your health; but in the sense that the spontaneity of what was happening seemed palpably unpredictable.

NAKAI: I think one common aspect in all of her works is her focus on the physical conditions surrounding the reading of a score. So it can be, in a very literal sense, that the score of the piece must be ripped open; or that the scale of the score is too large to hold, like the score that is the same size as the venue; or that the score is written in the form of an eye chart as in "Composed Improvisation E." In all these examples, Covito's scores are not exactly graphic notation, with indeterminacy in the Cagean sense. The relationship between the musical notes and the sounds to be performed remains conventional. But what she alters, are the physical conditions *surrounding* the score. Like, in the second half of the show, there was a piece called "Composed Improvisation L," in which the notes of the score were written in glow-in-the-dark ink, and we therefore had to make the venue as dark as possible.

HOFFMAN: Did any of these pieces give you ideas for additional variations on the piece?

NAKAI: Actually, once you see her approach, the common ground between her works, it does prompt other ideas. It was the case with me

in a funny way. I had made a piece, three or four years ago, in which I approached the issue of notation in a similar way without knowing Covito's music. When I came to New York, many people asked me what I do, and I'd say, "I make music, I write music"; and people just kept asking me the same question: "Can you write a piece for me?" So I came up with the idea for a piece where I would literally write the same thing over and over again, but the results will somehow vary each time. What I did was to type the instructions of the score onto a tree leaf.

HOFFMAN: With a typewriter?

NAKAI: Yes. And what happens when you type is that all of the round letters like "o" and "a"—they make holes. So when you reverse the leaf, you can read those holes as music notes. I just type or write the instructions saying you should use the opposite side of the leaf as a music score, and so on, but because of the differences in size and shape of each leaf, the position of the notes always ends up being different.

HOFFMAN: On top of a grid?

NAKAI: The typing of instructions only creates holes, but the instructions also say that you can use the leaf veins as systems of articulation. [Laughter.]

HOFFMAN: It would take some practice to learn how to read it. . . .

NAKAI: The way I relate it to Covito's works is that my instructions say that you have to hang this leaf in the center of the venue and then position yourself the furthest distance from which you can read the letters. And you start playing the opposite side as music notes, but slowly continue to move backwards away from the score until you can't read any more.

HOFFMAN: And that's the end of the piece.

NAKAI: That's the end of the performance. So, if there were two performers, they would start from different locations according to how good their sights are. This piece of *No Collective* reminds me of Covito's eye chart piece. It's a little bit different, but . . .

HOFFMAN: Where do you see the crucial difference?

NAKAI: One of the things that I try to deal with is the impermanence of the score over distance—and not only spatial, but also temporal distance. Because the instructions are written on a leaf, the score naturally crumbles over the years. So after the instruction telling the performer to skip all notes that become unreadable while distancing him or herself away from the score in performance, I have another instruction which says, “if any instruction becomes unreadable over the course of time, skip it for subsequent performances.” And the piece itself—not the performance, but the piece itself—ends when no instruction can be read any more. This aspect of time, experienced through the physicality of the score, is something I don’t think her work deals with. The readability of her linguistic instructions is never in itself rendered indeterminate.

HOFFMAN: So, the relation of each performance to other performances of the piece would have an evolutionary aspect.

NAKAI: Exactly. And, in fact, the title of the piece is the whole instruction, so the title of the piece will also change as the leaf disintegrates and gets smaller.

HOFFMAN: Perhaps as with a book, with scribbled notes and worn pages, which conveys the feeling that somebody was there.

NAKAI: Yes.

HOFFMAN: Can you tell me something about the preparatory process for Covito’s concert? What were the rehearsal sessions like?

NAKAI: Well, first of all, there were basically no rehearsals, since her scores needed to be sight-read in the actual performance. But most of her pieces, the floor piece especially, do require performers to spend a substantial amount of time and effort making the scores. I’m very interested in that, because that process is something that has to take place, but I feel it’s not so clearly acknowledged in the score that she writes, nor is it in the performance itself. It’s this intermediate process. . . .

HOFFMAN: Did every piece have a score?

NAKAI: Yes, we had to either compose or choose a score for every piece. This process is not rehearsing, because most of the pieces are just played on the spot. It’s kind of similar to when you have a graphic

score, of John Cage or whomever, and you have to come up with a realization, a performance score. But it's also different because what Covito provides is neither a graphic score, nor materials for making a score. The only thing you have is a written manual which tells you how to compose a score.

Covito also has this notion she calls "found score," as in 'found object.' Because her focus is on the physical condition under which a score is read, in many cases, what the score actually is doesn't really matter. So instead of writing all the notes yourself, you can find a Beethoven score, for example, and just glue the pages together and use that as the score.

For "Composed Improvisation E," we used Bartók's *Mikrokosmos* because we just literally *found* it in the back room of Vaudeville Park. And then of course we had to put it into Photoshop and actually arrange the score in the form of an eye chart. But all the notes came from Bartók.

HOFFMAN: Another composer I just thought of, not in terms of the score aspect, but in terms of an interest in long-term community music-making, is Alvin Curran. Do you see any relation between any of his pieces and those of Covito?

NAKAI: I never thought about it. In terms of the communal aspect there might be relationships. But, in Covito's case, it's very focused on the process of making the score. And, again, this process is not rehearsing, nor making the music together. None of us had actually played the music until we got to the venue. But, we had been creating these scores for almost a month. I'm not sure if I have come across the requirement of that kind of activity in other composers' pieces. The most similar thing, like I said, would be, for example, David Tudor sitting down and trying to come up with a realization of one of Cage's graphic scores, for a month or weeks. But it's not exactly the same because we're not realizing something from a graphic score; we're actually composing the score itself.

HOFFMAN: That's a very big difference. I think this leads in a cogent way to my question about sound—how crucial is the sound itself to the dynamics that were played out?

NAKAI: I think there has to be sound in Covito's work because in a performance situation it's all about the reading of a score. And, by "reading," I mean "rendering" the score into sound. So in that sense,

sound is as important as in any other concert music situation. I think the difference can be explained again through her notion of “found score.” The sound has to occur but the focus is not so much in the quality of sound or the actual notes that are played. It’s not about “what” so much as it is about “how” the score is read and played. Again, the notes may have been written by Bartók. So, in terms of “what,” the notes are *Mikrokosmos*. But the focus of her work is in the whole process of reading a given score under a specific performance environment. So, in a way, seeing that process is as important as listening to it. Perhaps that is another reason Covito doesn’t allow her works to be recorded. They need to be both seen and heard at the same time. In any case, I don’t think it is possible to perform it without sound.

HOFFMAN: It is part of the rendering.

NAKAI: Yes.

HOFFMAN: Do you imagine a range of valid interpretations of such a piece? For most of the performances I heard, and saw, there was a seriousness about them that really impressed me. So, for example, with the eye chart, it seemed to me that the fact that you had so many really good singers was probably influencing the manner in which everybody else was singing.

NAKAI: Yes, that’s true.

HOFFMAN: Nobody lost their composure, nobody broke character. . . .

NAKAI: This also depends on the piece. Because her works preserve the traditional reading method of stave notation, they don’t leave much space to improvise, in the specific sense of having to strictly follow the score. The eye chart piece (“Composed Improvisation E”) is a very good example. The instructions tell us that we should play in unison as much as possible and that people should drop out when they can’t see or follow the score any more. And there were some questions I got from the performers, asking me whether it was okay, when they reached a threshold of visibility, to start guessing the next note. So I answered them that—and I think this is implied in the score—you may try to guess, but the fact that you have to play in unison inevitably causes you to notice when your guess is wrong, since you will be able to hear whether you’ve started to deviate from the unison. So then you have to drop out. In a way, it is exactly the same as reading a real eye

chart. You can guess, but if you're told that you're wrong, then you stop. You don't guess any more. There is that . . .

HOFFMAN: feedback loop . . .

NAKAI: Yes, and so in that sense there aren't so many spaces to improvise or play around, since you have to stick to the score. . . .

HOFFMAN: . . . because it would be obvious . . . and it wouldn't work.

NAKAI: Yes. There are other pieces in which the constraints of her instructions set are not as clear or strong as "Composed Improvisation E." For example, there was another piece we presented called "Composed Improvisation J," where a composer had to write a score, which included jokes as well as ordinary music notes. Early on, I wasn't so sure about this piece, but there were several people who wanted to do it, so I left it for them to do. Covito's instructions say that the notes and the jokes should be arranged "contrapuntally," but the meaning of that is also left for interpretation. In my opinion, that piece has too much of a space to play around with. And, plus, it is jokes. People can try to be funny, but trying to be funny is not always that funny. So it's a very hard piece, I think, compared with "Composed Improvisation E."

#### DISTANCE BETWEEN "PERFORMER"/"PERFORMED RESULT"

HOFFMAN: Your Facebook event posting says that "Covito's work focuses on modulating the problematic dichotomy between composition and improvisation in highly inventive, lucid and humorous ways." I want to start by asking you about certain contentions here in Covito's work. Is there a composition/improvisation dichotomy?

NAKAI: This [pointing to the cover of the printed program] is supposed to be the diagram of what she is saying here. I think the question also relates to the issue of whether Covito has an extra-musical agenda. I'm not so well-informed about this, but I think she has two things in which she is really interested. One is the issue of ecology; and the other is feminism. I think she studied ecology in university, then applied whatever conceptions she had about ecology to music; and likewise with feminism.

HOFFMAN: Could you tell me in your own words how you read her description of the problematic, from the point of improvisation?

NAKAI: I think what she is trying to say is that usually in composition, the composer composes, and the performer performs it. And in that case there is always the problem, kind of like what John Cage also articulated, that music is always pre-determined. Performers are there to realize, as accurately as possible, what has already been determined.

HOFFMAN: Although, it is also the way we speak about it that makes it so. Our assumptions about the process are more rigid, I think, than what happens. In any persuasive performance, I often see a lot more going on in the space between the score and the performer than traditional discussion of the separation allows.

NAKAI: Yes, this is a diagram, and it obviously articulates the issue in very schematic terms. But sticking to it, Covito's point is that on the composition side there is always that hierarchy between the composer and the performer. The performer is supposed to be faithful to what the composer gives him or her. On the other side of the spectrum, there is improvisation. And with improvisation, the problems of pre-determinate hierarchy that composition has don't seem to apply, because the performer composes in real time. But, from Covito's perspective, there is a different issue on that side: most of the things that happen in improvisation tend to be reduced to what the performer can do. So he or she does not, or cannot, go outside what he or she already knows. And one function of a score is precisely to take the performer out of the closure of what you can already do via an external system. So I think that's the layout of the problematic for her, and what this diagram [for "Composed Improvisation F + M"] tries to articulate. So given that . . .

HOFFMAN: It's very Adornian.

HOFFMAN/NAKAI (in sync): It's very dialectic.

NAKAI: So the solution for her is to first of all introduce distance between the performer and what is performed, because there is always a score that you have to follow in her works. In that sense, something is always composed. But, at the same time, because all her scores tweak around with the physical conditions of reading the score, it's not always so obvious that one can read a score, even if the score is determinate: if

you turn off the lights, you can't read it. Or if you're ten meters away, you can't read it. So the act of reading a score itself becomes something that the performer has to go through, and improvise, in real time. That kind of altering the relationship happens between the performer and the score.

HOFFMAN: It opens that relationship up to view.

NAKAI: Exactly.

HOFFMAN: Which is kind of fascinating because it's not usually apparent at all. It's totally hidden. I mean, you can make an analogy maybe between that stage of the normal acoustic paradigm, and that stage of a performance with a technological element, where you can't really see what's happening.

#### ON HUMOR

HOFFMAN: OK, let's move on. The humor aspect. Do you have any strong thoughts about the mechanism of this in Covito's work?

NAKAI: I think her works tend to be funny as a result of altering the situational condition, because the performer has to struggle his or her way through the performance. So humor is always involved in that way, like a residue, so to speak. But I think being humorous itself is not the essential end or purpose of these pieces.

HOFFMAN: Is it a release valve for the performers?

NAKAI: The funnier you deliberately try to be, the more it fails; because the whole point is to try as hard as you can to read and follow a given score seriously.

HOFFMAN: It's more like comic relief then. Can you contrast her humor with that of Cage?

NAKAI: I think with Cage, humor is created, if not through the literal use of language, then through the juxtaposition of seemingly irrelevant elements, including language and music, via chance. This is not the case with Covito. Of course, in Cage's theatrical pieces, humor also arises out of seeing a performer struggling her/his way through

the performance. But, I think here too, there is a difference. In many cases, what the audience is seeing in Covito's works are performers trying to see, or read, a score. And, of course, you *yourself* can see the score. So . . .

HOFFMAN: There's an empathy.

NAKAI: Yes. It's that relationship that is presented on stage. Because what you're seeing is happening between the score and the performer, and you can see them both, you can identify with the performer's struggles quite literally or physically. This is for instance the case with the glow-in-the-dark score ["Composed Improvisation L,"] where the venue gets totally dark, so the only thing you can see are these scores glowing.

NO COLLECTIVE

HOFFMAN: Can you tell me a little about No Collective itself? Is this a Japanese word? Or do you intend its English meaning?

NAKAI: Its English meaning. The name "No Collective" comes from a poem that my poet friend Sawako Nakayasu wrote for me. She was doing this project where she would ask people for a word, and then write a poem using that word for each person. When she asked me for a word, I was at that moment struggling to put together a group performance, so the word that was in my head was "collective," and she wrote a poem called "No Collective." It was about a group of ants trying to form a collective and failing because of their inherently collective nature. I just took the whole title.

HOFFMAN: It's a beautiful little story.

NAKAI: I think one of the things that we, the members of No Collective, are concerned with is to problematize and relativize what I call the "infrastructures" of music performance. These are the things that people need in order for any music performance to exist but are usually not acknowledged because they are so naturalized. And so our pieces try to delve into these invisible strata of music practice. In that very broad sense, the work of No Collective does connect with Covito's work because she takes the score-performance relationship, which is one element in music practice, and tries to open new ways of

connecting them. But, the difference between Covito and No Collective is that we're not specifically concerned about the problematic of the score in itself. Our pieces tend to do away with scores, in general. Scores usually specify the content of what is performed but we try to deal with the infrastructure upon which content is displayed. That is why whenever we do use scores in a performance, we use them as decoys, as visible elements in a piece which the audience can easily identify and relate to, but often in a misleading manner. What we really try to construct is the entirety of the performance.

For example, one piece that I made for No Collective is called "Lullaby." Basically, I was asked to compose a piece for piano that I would play in front of an audience. And I grew up playing the piano, but I stopped long time ago, so I'm not that good, and have to really practice if I were to play in public. So I taught myself to play Brahms' Lullaby [sings it] as perfectly as I can, with my eyes closed and all. It took me about 3 or 4 days to learn this, and I didn't sleep for the entire time I was learning it. . . . So, on the evening of the concert I was really tired and sleepy, and I played the lullaby until I fell asleep. [Laughter.] So, our focus there wasn't the score. Comparatively, Covito's pieces as an oeuvre seem to be pretty coherent. Her focus is always on this specific issue, whereas we tend to get bored more easily and go in different directions each time.

HOFFMAN: But, even for No Collective, the frame of the concert introduces the infrastructure of the structured time of the ritual.

NAKAI: Yes, but we've also tried to deal with that. For instance, one of the things we often do is to incorporate the process of announcing a concert into the piece itself. So in a piece called "Concertos No. 1," we designed three different flyers with three different titles, each one seemingly pertaining to a specific genre, but all addressing the same venue and time. In another piece ("Concertos No. 2"), all the flyers had different starting and ending times. And after most audiences had left we went out to drink with all the remaining people, still wearing our portable speakers and microphones, and so the concert went on until all the batteries died out. Or in a more recent work ("Concertos No. 3"), we would halt the performance midway and not resume until one audience group left. And we kept doing that until there were no audience left, but only performers. So all these tactics aim to relativize the seemingly singular frame of the concert, and to expose instead an overlay of multiple temporal and spatial structures.

Also, in the case I just mentioned, for example, lullabies are really functional. They repeat the same thing over and over again so that you lose focus and fall asleep. [Laughter.] And I had initially told the curators that I *was* going to play this until I fell asleep. But they told me that I couldn't play more than 20 minutes.

HOFFMAN: Really?

NAKAI: So, I set an alarm on my piano that would go off at around 20 minutes. But I didn't wake up to the alarm, I woke up to the applause of the audience. So in the end, it worked!

HOFFMAN: That's totally fascinating. That's a lot of pressure to put on yourself, but it's a perverse kind of pressure because usually we want *not* to fall asleep in a performance. In this case, you had to fall asleep. That seems somewhat Covito-like.

NAKAI: In a way, yes, but here again it's not about my relationship to the score. You could say that instead of changing the physical condition under which a score is read, I changed the performer's own physical condition, and then exposed myself to the functionality of music quite literally.

HOFFMAN: Do you intuit or see clearly ways in which Covito's work is tied to Buenos Aires?

NAKAI: Not really, since I myself have never been to Buenos Aires, nor do I know too much about the city. The only vague, albeit imaginary, connection I make is with Borges—some of Covito's works strike me as very Borgesian, especially, for instance, the score which covers up the entire floor of the venue; the first thing I thought of was the short story by Borges called "On the Exactitude of Science" which is about a map that is the same size as the territory it depicts. But I also feel that Covito's piece suggested only a surface resemblance (Borges' story does not go into the issue of reading that map, for instance), so my honest answer is that I don't know about where Covito's Buenos Aires provenance might enter into her sound and thought.

HOFFMAN: How did you hope the audience would feel during the performance at Vaudeville Park? In other words, how did you envision the role of the audience in the Covito program?

NAKAI: In a way I thought the position of the audience at Vaudeville Park was much more similar to a typical “traditional” Western art concert than are the concerts of No Collective (for one thing, the Covito audience was not forced to leave!). The boundary between audience and performers was clear (again, compared to what we do at No Collective’s concerts). They were there to sit, experience, and hopefully appreciate what the performers were doing. In terms of the audience’s feelings I think Covito’s pieces have all a very easily likeable aspect. I found that out when I first started to gather performers. Almost everybody I called upon seemed to immediately understand and appreciate her work. They have that simple and strong quality. So I did not worry so much about whether or not the audience would enjoy the concert. Another thing is that because most of Covito’s work is about tweaking the physical conditions under which a performer reads and sees a score, the audience is placed in a position of getting to see the performers straining to see and play the score. So in most cases what they are trying to see, and why it is hard for them to see it, are in themselves clearly visible, and the audience’s appreciation is based on this aspect of seeing all these layers (whereas in No Collective’s pieces we aim for the opposite, and try to limit the ability for a given audience or even a performer to see and experience the entirety of the work).

HOFFMAN: Might Covito’s works be called theater? Or is it essential to use the label “music”?

NAKAI: I can only answer this question from my own point of view. I personally hesitate to use the term “theater” for two reasons. First, because the term, when used in a context like this, is generally derived from the discourse of John Cage, and I think his use of the term can be, and should be, problematized. Without this procedure, “theater” is just another convenient word (like “performance art”) which can frame everything, but is devoid of significance. It is convenient because it is empty. Second, I am very interested in theater as a genre (which of course has a much longer history than the metaphoric use of the term in music), but I am fully aware that I don’t know enough about its methods, tactics, discourse, and discipline to confidently articulate my reasons for calling Covito’s concert music “theater.” I know enough about music, its history, methods, disciplines, and so on and so forth, to be conscious in strategically applying the word to what we are doing. In other words, I think that because I know “music” better than “theater” I am more capable of, as well as more interested in, using or forcing that term to do something it has not done before.

Retaining the old name in this way is also more interesting an intervention for me than the much easier and hastier move of coming up with new names, like “sound-art.”

HOFFMAN: Thank you for talking, You.