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## Richard Lerman at New Langton Arts April 8, 1996

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**This article reviews Lerman's artistic developments in technical sound.**

The work of sound artist, composer and film-maker, Richard Lerman, was the subject of a mini-retrospective at New Langton Arts in San Francisco on April 8, 1996. Co-presented with Cinematheque, the event was part of the recent Soundculture '96 Festival. Live performance, film and video represented a remarkable body of work developed from 1980 through 1996.

At the heart of Lerman's artistic enquiry is his development and refinement of self-built musical instruments which use piezoelectric transducers--"piezo disks," as Lerman calls them. These are familiar to most of us in the form of the little speakers found in wristwatches and video games. Manufactured in a variety of sizes under 2 inches, they are also employed by drummers as a type of percussion trigger used for electronic drums. When used as microphone elements, Lerman attaches them to anything from a cactus to a boat dock. Piezoelectric transducers are extremely sensitive and possess a particular resonant signature; this imposes a veneer of uniformity onto sounds. While each sound certainly speaks for itself, a unity of perspective, like a coloured filter, is provided via the particularities of the technology. As contact microphones, piezo disks provide a unique perspective in the experience of micro-sounds. They are in direct contact with mechanical vibration through different materials. In describing the focus of the retrospective, Lerman writes, "All this work has evolved from my explorations using piezo disks to amplify small sounds, which I began in 1976. I think of this 20 year process as investigation into the nature of both ear drums and microphones."

In technical application and formal concern, Lerman's art touches on phenomenological observation and the primacy of sensory experience. The first work on the program was a performance entitled, *Changing States 3* (1992). Commenting on the evolutionary process of this piece, Lerman comments, "I first used the technique of heating amplified metal with flame in a performance piece from 1985. Early versions of *Changing States* were more improvisatory. The title refers to the change in the metal as the chromium atoms recrystallize after being heated. The score uses labanotation-like symbols to tell the performer how to move the flame over the metal to release the sound."

The remaining portion of the first half of the evening brought together a selection of Super-8 films from the *The Transducer Series* including *A Copper Strip on Fire* (1983), *David and Sharon with Pond Life* (1984), *Newfoundland Transducer*

**Series** (1986), and **A Windharp at La Pataia State Park, Tierra del Fuego, Argentina** (1988). In his program notes, Lerman relates, "[These] films were begun in 1983, and were all shot in Super-8. They were to be an open ended investigation of using self-built microphones, both as camera subject and audio input. I made more than 50 of these films, the last one in 1988."

Following an intermission, the artist presented **Four Places at South Point** (1989); South Point is the southernmost point in the US. The piece is a quotidian view and a two-channel soundscape of a windswept island in Hawaii. The most recent of Lerman's works in video and stereo sound is **Sonoran Desert Ants** (1996). The sounds of tiny feet and the mechanically transmitted sounds of vocalizations were matched with an equally focused close-up view of ants as they negotiated a piezo disk placed near their mound. He writes that the composition is... & quot;part of a year-long project I am now engaged in called a sonic mapping of the Sonoran desert. I have been recording cactus thorns, rocks, etc. in the desert portions of Phoenix." The project is sponsored by the Institute for Studies in the Arts at Arizona State University, Tempe, where Lerman currently teaches.

The artist's films and videos are a form of expressing and describing landscape, in whose images we are given closed and expansive views with dramatically shifting depth-of-field. While compelling views of musical instruments and their immediate settings are juxtaposed, a traditional, Renaissance perspective is maintained. However, the soundscapes are the voice of specific and detailed elements, not of the ambient or general environment; they relate to a part of the whole, not the whole. The dynamic tension of aural and visual point of view is a challenge to how we generally synthesize the two sensations into a unified perspective.

Lerman also investigates associative powers of sound through those works which relate to a sense of place and history; here too, the piezo transducer is a lens through which the aural experience is realized. The video tape entitled, **Two Windharps at the Tokugawa Women's Grave, Tokyo** (1991), which was included here, was part of a collaborative installation called Takuhon with artist, Mona Higuchi, and several other artists that were presented in Tokyo. Pitched tones from aeolian harps provided an evocative and contemplative basis for the views of the cemetery.

The most haunting of the video works was **Manzanar and Dachau** (1994). Lerman writes, "This tape also became part of several collaborative installations with Mona Higuchi--based on the liberation of Dachau by Japanese-American soldiers in May, 1945 while their families were interned in concentration camps in the US." There is a sense, within the intimacy of the varied close-up perspectives, that the memory of sound is still resonant. The vibrations of rusting barbed wire, emblematic of the Holocaust, resound today as they did more than 50 years ago. It seemed as though imbedded in the material itself are the voices of those who perished and those who suffered.

The finale on the program was a powerful performance of **Incident at 3 Mile Island: An Elegy for Karen Silkwood** (1980). This piece was premiered in May 1980, in Portland, Oregon, before the first entry into the damaged reactor. Lerman, clad in a white suit, wearing gloves and a welder's helmet entered into the installation of hanging tuning forks, whose gentle rotations scattered light from a laser around the darkened hall. The tuning forks were amplified using piezo disks and played with mallets. Sounds gradually layered and formed a dense texture through the use of pre-recorded tape delays from previous performances, suggesting a dirge with half-lives...

For more information about Richard Lerman's use of piezoelectric transducers refer to his article in *Experimental Musical Instruments* magazine (December, 1994). *Experimental Musical Instruments*, P.O. Box 784, Nicasio, CA 94946. E-mail: ExpMusInst@aol.com. Recent compositions by Richard Lerman can be found on "Within Ear Reach" on Artifact Records.



## ::CrossReference

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