Pamela Z: Words Move Electronically

Charlie Morrow interviews Pamela Z

Pamela Z is a composer-performer and media artist who creates works for voice, electronic processing, samples, gesture activated MIDI controllers, and video. She has toured throughout the US, Europe, and Japan. She has composed scores for dance, film, and chamber ensembles (including the Kronos Quartet). Her awards include the Rome Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and many more. She and I met when she was commissioned by the Kitchen in New York to create a 3D music work for my True3D Soundcube in 2004. [photo credit: Lori Eanes]

Pamela Z: So, how ARE you!?

Charlie Morrow: I'm very well, thanks. I'm in Vermont in about 3 feet of snow. My home and archive are here in the mountains. So what I'm doing here is I'm working on a book and podcast called *immerse!* The questions I wanted to ask you about are – there's just 2 – one is: What is your current practice relative to immersive experience and creating immersive experiences? And, the other question is: When were you first inspired in this direction and how did it lead from that point forward?

Pamela Z: Well, let's see, to answer the first part about what's currently happening. Very interesting that you should ask that because I just literally two days ago had an opening at the American Academy in Rome as part of an exhibition called Cinque Mostre; that is a piece called "Sonora Spolia." And that is a piece that I created by making interviews with about 40 people, mostly Rome Prize fellows that are here with me at the American Academy but also some of their fellow travelers and a couple of visiting artists, visiting scholars and one or two people on the staff here. So, the idea was that I was going to create this piece – actually the larger work that I'm working on here is going to be a performance work.

I've been working very hard on it and the idea is basically this configuration of a 21-channel sound installation. It's essentially in this cryptoporticus, which is this long, wonderful arched hallway with seven skylights where light comes in from the cortile above. And then for each skylight I have three speakers hanging and then so it goes all the way down this long hallway. So it's very long, sort of this three-by-seven array of speakers. And I had designed the piece so that all these different fragments of speech sounds that I took from the interviews that I did are all being distributed among those speakers. And so the experience of the piece involves walking along that hallway in and among the speakers, almost like a little garden of sound, and with these voices popping up at all these different spots. So it's very immersive, it's probably more immersive as a sonic piece than anything I've made for a while and so it's interesting that that just so happens to be the project that I was in the midst of trying to complete when you contacted me ...

That's the thing I've been working on. And my plan is to go forward with it; I'm making a solo performance work and some of that material that was used in this 21-channel sound installation will certainly make its way into the performance work. But it will be immersive in a different way. It will certainly not be 21 channels that are discreet channels in the performance space.

It will more likely be a version of it that's just in stereo, but very spatialized stereo, or maybe some places have this ability to do quad or some other kinds of immersive things, so the sound can be somewhat immersive. But I tend to work back and forth between those. I tend to do a lot of work that doesn't require a multi-channel sound situation. I've had works that I've made that do require that. And then I've adapted adapted them for a situation that doesn't have that height ... Where I've had spatialized pieces that were originally intended to just be stereo in the first place.

Charlie Morrow: That sounds wonderful. Could I ask you what first inspired you with sound and environmental sound altogether; something that occurred to you as a baby or somewhere along the line that lit the fire?

Pamela Z: Well, I think I've been interested in sound and I've been involved in music making also similarly long. And for me, the line between those things is very blurry and has never been clear to me. But I think I would say that a big turning point in my life artistically and sonically occurred in the early 80s when I started playing with electronics and with processing my voice with electronics. That opened up my ears in a way helped me to begin listening in a way that I had never listened before and it changed the trajectory of the way that I compose and the way that I put together sound and the way I think about sound. That occurred, I would say in '82, '83 – in there. And that was probably the single biggest turning point I can think of.

Other interesting markers along the way are times when I was asked to make installation works. I was asked to make a sound piece, one for a gallery in Chicago; they had this exhibition called "The Art of Artist Statement" (2005). They asked all the artists involved to make something or contribute something to the show that had some relationship to the idea of artist statements, thinking about how artists feel about having to write them, anything like that. So I recorded the sound of my own voice saying the sentence: "I would like to think that the art itself would be enough of a statement." Then I took that one sentence and I began cutting it up, granulating it, stretching it, compressing it and making layers of it and I built a sound piece that was built entirely out of me saying those words. Most of it was unintelligible in terms of language. But every once in a while sentences would pop out.

At that time – this was long before I had the capabilities or the wherewithal to make a piece that was running off a computer's multi-channel sound – I was trying to figure out a way to make a multi-channel piece that would sort of surround and envelop the audience and the idea that I came up with was to make a 6-channel piece, but each channel would be half of a stereo pair that was panned hard left and hard right so that you actually had six discreet things. And then I created three stereo files – they were all slightly different lengths that had these fragments of speech built into them. And then they would all play on a loop on, I believe, CD players [laughs]. And so then there were two channels coming from each CD player, surrounding them in the gallery so that there were six speakers all the way around. And it was a constantly changing piece because the files were all different lengths and so they would loop, but they would loop out of phase with each other so that you could sit in the gallery all day and you'd never really hear the same combination of sounds twice. If memory serves, that is maybe the first multi-channel sound installation that I made.

Another really important sort of moment for me was your series that you did in the Cube at the Kitchen in New York. You did this wonderful series; basically you curated many different composers and sound artists who were making pieces that would be on your Sound Cube in the Kitchen. I believe that the piece I made for that wound up being part of a triptych of pieces that I later made that were also for various configurations of multi-channel sound. That was kind of a nice turning point for me because I had to really sit down and learn how to think about where each sound was going to come from and how they were going to interact with each other in this very specific kind of multi-channel immersive situation.

So yeah, that was kind of an important one. And then I'll mention one other piece that I made that was quite immersive and, in this case, was both video and sound. And so, I don't know if you're familiar with this guy Naut Humon ...

Charlie Morrow: I sure am ...

Pamela Z: (laughter) He had, at the time, a gallery in San Francisco called Recombinant Media Labs and he has since then reanimated that project as something that happens at the Gray Area Theater in San Francisco. But at that time, it was in his Recombinant Media Labs Gallery. So he has this room that he calls the CineChamber, which involves ten frame-locked channels of wide HD video that go around the room in a 360° seamless configuration. The room at the time was 24 feet by 36 feet. So there were ten 12-foot wide

screens, two on each end of the room and three on each of the long sides of the room. And they were all just end to end in this 360° configuration. He had 16 speakers that were in the corners and various places in the room and I think there were subwoofers maybe implanted under the floor or something. And so, I was commissioned to make a piece for that space and everything I'd ever seen in there at that point had been people either showing 10 copies of the same single-channel piece or sometimes they would show a two-channel piece that would just alternate the screens. But I hadn't seen anybody really make a piece that was site specific to that room.

Since then I've seen some amazing works for that configuration. But, at that time, I had not. But I was determined to make something that was really meant for that space. So I made a piece called "Sonic Gestures" and it had 10 discreet channels of video but often they would work together. So that sometimes, for example, I had these long arm gestures where my arm was reaching and I would extend the same image across the three screens that would be on one of the wide walls, so you would end up with this 36-foot long arm reaching. Then there were these sounds that were associated with the gestures. Sometimes there would be vocal sounds that were connected to those gestures as I was making them and sometimes there were sounds that would be the results of the gestures. For example, there was one whole section of the piece where I was just clapping my hands and so there were 10 different videos of my hands and I extreeeemely slowed them down so that the clapping sound became very low frequency, almost like thunderclaps and the hands were moving slowly so they were getting a sort of motion blur as they clapped. Several other movements including one that actually bizarrely had text on the screen that was wrapping Itself around; it was a section I called "The Long URL" and it was just this incredibly long internet address that just kept getting more and more characters added to it and then my voice reciting the characters and sort of spinning around people's heads at somewhat dizzying speeds.

So that was "Sonic Gestures" and that piece was kind of a major thing for me because – I was doing a lot of work with video-and-performance pieces, but I think it was sort of the first major video piece that I made. And it was also multi-channel video and multi-channel sound and it was intended to be entirely immersive so that people would be inside of this 360° array and just be surrounded on all sides by image and sound. I've since had the opportunity to show that piece in a number of different galleries in Europe because now it's much easier to do that just using a computer for the output for all those channels.

Yea, so, those are three examples of things that I've done with immersive, sort of sonic, environments and, in one case, also video.

Charlie Morrow: Well, thank you for those wonderful descriptions. They're very vividly conveyed what they're like and I hope to experience them myself. They sound wonderful. I appreciate very much that we could have this conversation and delighted that you made the time to meet me today. So thank you very much.

Pamela Z: Absolutely no problem at all. It was fun. And I hope that we cross paths again soon Charlie. Thanks for the project you're working on. It sounds great.

Charlie Morrow: We'll be in touch.

Pamela Z: Thanks. Bye bye.