

Some Thoughts on *Forever Got Shorter* Seth Kim-Cohen

Published in *Word Events: Perspectives on Verbal Notation*, James Saunders and John Lely, eds. Continuum, 2011.



The date of composition (2010) is dependent on the date of realization. In keeping with poststructuralist theories of authorship, the piece wasn't written until Ross performed it and an audience heard/saw/interpreted it. That said, I first conceived of the piece in 2008.

Since I first read Mel Bochner's essay "The Serial Attitude" (1967), I've been haunted by this prescription: "The completed work is fundamentally parsimonious and systematically self-exhausting." I don't accept this as talmudic law, but I do find it as valid a compositional aim as any other (harmony, symmetry, beauty). It is yet another mode of resolution. With *Forever Got Shorter*, the resolution is not proposed as failure, but as systematic self-exhaustion. The performance-as-organism fulfills its natural lifespan and dies. This is alluded to in step two of the score which equates the frequency of kick drum beats to the heart rate of animals. (Apparently, there is great consistency across species in terms of the number of times the heart beats in an average lifespan. Duration is determined by tempo. Hummingbirds exhaust their allotment of beats quickly, elephants more slowly.)

On the other hand, I chafe against passive radicalism: the safe, quiet, uneventful appropriation of revolutionary aesthetic modes. If one wishes to

do violence to the prevailing order, then, please, do it violently. Whispering "God is dead," under your breath, in the back of the temple, won't even make the rabbi blush. I spent a dozen years in a rock band. Toward the end, Michael Lenzi – to whom *Forever Got Shorter* is dedicated – and I adopted the practice of ending shows by wrecking the stage and destroying our instruments. We smashed guitars, we dove into the drum kit, we kicked over amplifiers, etc. We did this because the "fuck you" that rock and roll must be in order to validate its existence as a cultural form, had disappeared. All the gestures had been assimilated into a polite and tidy language, spoken by bands, fans, and critics with equal ease. Now, I am fully aware that smashing instruments is a rock and roll trope like any other. And perhaps that's why I don't play rock and roll anymore. But in composition and in the gallery world, some rock-like gestures are still potent. You don't see the drum kit toppled at Royal Festival Hall nearly as often as you did at CBGB. *Forever Got Shorter*, then, is an attempt to restore some violence to the radicalism of aleatory composition, conceptual practice, and avant garde performance. Granted, it's not a steel bar to the teeth, but there nonetheless exists the possibility of harm to property, performer, and conventional practice, possibly even to the audience (like when a tire flies into the stands at a motor race).

The title of the piece comes indirectly from the title of a song by the 90s emocore band, Braid. Michael Lenzi created a handmade t-shirt bearing that inscription and wore it for the last few performances in the career of our band, The Fire Show. The title implies the disappearance of something that had been taken for granted as being permanent. It could reference a love affair, mortality, god, or values like truth and goodness. The drum beat employed in the piece, detached from other musical material, suggests eternal repetition, the beat returning to its origins at the start of each measure. Yet, as pieces of the kit fall away, the beat must adapt to its newly-limited resources until, eventually, it has nothing to sustain it. Sound is

always the product of the interaction of two (or more) things: stick and head, for instance. Even John Cage's realization that as long as we're alive there is sound, is a product of the interaction of plural biological factors, i.e., blood, veins, and eardrums. When that plurality is reduced to singularity, sound stops, forever gets shorter. Ironically, gay-John Cage's sonic optimism finds its equally profound, pessimistic implications in the gay rights, AIDS-activist, slogan "Silence = Death." Mushrooms and Zen notwithstanding, we can't escape the real world of politics, power, and disease, et al.

As it happens, *Forever Got Shorter* has been followed by another drum-violence piece. *Critique of Instrumental Reason (By The Use of Drums)* (October 2010, at the exhibition *Non-Cochlear Sound* at Diapason Gallery in Brooklyn). This involves chucking a drum kit down a flight of stairs, collecting the drums in a wheelbarrow at the bottom, wheeling them through the gallery to the elevator, and back up to the top of the stairs - to be repeated for the duration of the exhibition.