

seth nehil : node and strip: on Olivia Block's *Mobius Fuse*

Olivia Block is an electroacoustic composer living in Chicago who concentrates on the fruitful intersections between electronics, altered acoustic sources and instruments such as woodwinds and strings. We have worked together as collaborators on a variety of projects since 1996 and, beginning in 1999 until its release in 2001, I was privileged to hear and comment on various stages of her second cd, *Mobius Fuse*. 31 minutes long, it is the second part of a projected trilogy of recorded works that (at least so far) focus on a particular quality of spare orchestration, and the introduction of instrumental elements into indeterminate structures consisting of field recordings and electronic sounds. Olivia's works tend to be careful, precise and laboriously constructed. Her two solo cds have both been long in the making and short in the playing. They are, however, full experiences, rich in detail and variety.

Mobius Fuse is made up of two halves that participate in a circular unity. These two parts interact in a dialectical relation, through which they are joined, as apparent "sides" of a singular shape. They consist, generally speaking, of a "pure sound" section (the much longer of the two) and a second, elaborately constructed and finely-etched "moment-in-time". These balanced parts are "fused" together, sparking a process of division and conjunction. At the same time, they are a "fuse", quickly burning and setting off explosions along the way. The distinction between the two parts brings our attention to what is in between, and in completing the cycle, we remember that the two sides of the strip are not only joined but are the same.

The first section carries us through various qualities of clicking, popping, scraping, crackling, pulses and distorted brass tones which rise and fall in carefully articulated waves. This immersive, flowing and abstract composition is immediately and surprisingly followed by what seems to be a field recording of a small brass band playing a short, humble tune while people mill about, crickets call in the evening, cars pass leisurely and fireworks explode in the distance. It is difficult to give an impression of how unexpected this "field recording" is after the transport of the previous sounds. However, the substantiality of the second part has a way of bringing us back, through reference, memory and opposition, to the abstraction of the first, from which we begin again.

Chronologically, we reach the apparently real only after a subsuming relationship with the "pre-real" - unformed, fragmentary and unstable. This ordering works against a potential for placing the parts into simple duality. The abstract section operates as a memory of what is to come, while also being its foundational substructure. The elements of each section also belong to the other, but while they are descriptive and functional on the one side, on the other they are pulled apart, examined, dissected and viewed from all directions. In one part the elements are solid, in the other they are liquid. A moment is transformed into a malleable material, or is it the other way around? Individual sounds (crickets, wind, cars, instruments, people, etc.) seem fragmented almost beyond recognition. Perhaps instead we can say that they have been broken down to a generally transferable sonic substance - a pre-form that is beginning to find its shape. We can hear the materials changing density and consistency, fluidly altering form. They are constantly shifting contours, their identities are in a state of audible transformation, and along this trajectory diverse and dynamic states are encountered. Fireworks explode then condense into dropping particles which become crackling plastic transforming into burning wood... In moving from one to the other, we find a commonality between all these elements - the part of their structure that is shared.

Structurally, two separate fireworks anchor the entirety of the first section. They are pinpoints from which the composition enters and exits like twisted ribbon - an extreme compression of materials out of which the other sounds blossom. The choice of fireworks as a sound-source is, in particular, a direct confrontation with the temporality of music. They are a quickly passing visual/aural impression - a form which begins to disappear immediately. The experience of watching fireworks at close range can give direct insight into the relation of sound and image. The sound hits, slightly delayed from its visual counterpart, and it can strike the chest with a force that is physical. The slight pause highlights a tension between the barely forming, hardly grasped ephemerality of the image and the overwhelming, almost violent sonic force. Each explosion is seen as an articulated, three-dimensional form etched by light which has color and character but which fades before the eye has been fully

able to register its existence. The display instantly falls apart, a flash of brilliance expanding into faintness, gradually cooling and merging with the background. Olivia has contemplated this process, and her sounds exist in much the same way.

The flow of section one is contained by the two explosion-nodes from which the other elements expand and contract. They surface as solid events, surrounded by a time-expanded reverie in which rudimentary concepts are spelled-out and confused: "explosion", "wind-on-mic", "crickets", "musical instruments". This is an extended, stretched glimpse into the spaces between. During this time, an entire process of movement and understanding operates in relation to the structure of sound and image, the moment after experience and before comprehension. The composition seems to slow everything down, allowing each sound to rotate before our ears, to fully dissect the impact of a phenomenological occurrence. Olivia's first cd, *Pure Gaze*, has a similar morphology, during which a single piano chord's resonances are greatly extended, like a daydream. This moment literally stretches time with space, carrying the chord, as Olivia has said "over a canyon". That is, time extends to absorb other places and, by extension, occurrences. The sense of reverie is strongly encouraged by this "spatial drift". In *Mobius Fuse*, it is as if this idea has taken over. Instead of providing a context for the daydream, positions have switched and the daydream gives context to the "actual".

This side of *Mobius Fuse* can have a way of moving forward in shuttering blinks, as two simultaneous, contrasting speeds of motion. The meta-movement is gradual, slowly evolving like white against blue while the micro-movement is fast, a rapid succession of black frames, flickering. These opposing forces glide past each other in coordinated gracefulness, like synchronized swimmers.

In part two, all of these elements coalesce into a "real-constructed" event occurring in "real-constructed" time. The microscopic components previously examined come together into a fully realized moment in all of its matter-of-factness. The paradox of this "reality" is that it has been entirely manufactured. This apparently casual, cultural music experience was in actuality very carefully assembled from gathered components. However, it is not only a quasi-filmic representation which is meant to evoke some shared ("American") experience. The brief, anthemic song exists somewhere in-between patriotic ode, drinking song, lullaby - just a little too blandly generic to be definitely placed. The crickets are a little too loud and insistent, the cymbal crashes are patently false, and the overall space is somehow askew. And yet, this construction can be entirely seductive - like a movie, we allow ourselves to be fooled. To a listener familiar with the implied scene, there is almost the odor of fresh-mown grass and roasting corn.

There is another strong shift in these two halves, as we move out from the internal daydream of the first section to the social music of part two which is an external experience in every way. This "concert" takes place outdoors, it is presumably shared by a group of people who are presumably celebrating a cultural occasion. This slice-of-life seems to happen in the space outside of and between people. It stands in stark contrast to the hermetic, mental, abstract sounds that have immediately proceeded, yet it shares almost all of the same elements (albietly in drastically different form). Olivia has stated that the slightly off-kilter brass-band music was inspired by the ragtag African brass groups of the 1970's.⁽¹⁾ In other words, this is a music not only between people but between cultures. This short song exists in a sort of "no-man's land".

Part two of *Mobius Fuse* could be said to have an uneasy relationship to standard genres of experimental music in its replication of standard anthemic form. Can this 'song' be accepted as "electronic music" (as the the first section most certainly would)? It was, in the end, 'electronically' constructed. We must listen to the whole cd as a singular entity, intrinsically connected, despite the determined stylistic and textural tension. While the interplay of these two drastically different modes is quite fascinating, this arrangement is perhaps a very conceptual and formal proposition. It would seem that the future of Olivia's work holds more intuitive, shifting, "formless" structures. In coming works, I believe we can expect to hear Olivia's technical and expressive skill loosen, resulting in organic, growing forms which continue to hold distinct pleasure.

1. In particular, *Frozen Brass*, African Edition, Pan Records