

Working from home cat owners will not be surprised, but the evidence is public: Olivia Block's cats take an abiding interest in her activities at the keyboard. In April 2020, she broadcast a concert from her home in Chicago as part of Experimental Sound Studio's Quarantine Concerts. While she played organ and blew into a microphone, one cat settled on a windowsill and watched her impassively for several minutes, before a paw started prodding her from behind. With practised ease, Block reached around, hoisted a second cat onto her shoulder, and kept playing.

Block's rapport with another species offers insight into an artistic practice that, over more than two decades, has encompassed intense home studio work, solo concerts, collaborative efforts with improvisors and orchestral musicians, sound installations designed with pan-species inclusivity in mind, and most recently, viscerally effective instrumental music made under the influence of hallucinogenic mushrooms.

In the final quarter of 2021, she has released two works. The first, *October, 1984*, via deep listening label Longform Editions, is Block's latest piece to have been slowly and painstakingly assembled from environmental recordings, collected sounds and instrumental passages that have either had their identities blurred or certain qualities magnified. The second, *Innocent Passage In The Territorial Sea* on Lawrence English's Room40 label, is a sequence of shorter tracks completed with comparative haste in a little over a year.

"My work revolves around a studio practice, almost like I'm a visual artist," explains Block, speaking by video chat from her home. "The joy of the process for me is working in the studio. After I record the initial sounds, it's getting in the studio and really messing with those sounds, and seeing what properties and what possibilities they have. If I use a field recording, my work isn't about necessarily that place of the recording, or having a relationship with the recording device in some certain way. Of course, there's inherent meaning there, but that's not what I focus on. I'm really focusing on getting my hands dirty in the studio, and seeing what strange sub-mixes I can get.

"The studio is the place where I know what I'm doing," she continues. "Whereas everything else is kind of like a learning experience. I learn things quickly, I research like crazy and I'm trying things. But the studio is my wheelhouse".

Block was born in 1971 and grew up in Dallas, Texas. As a child, she took piano lessons. "I was a terrible sight reader, and I think that kind of kept me away from the piano for a long time. I just stopped playing because there was always, for lack of a better word, emotional or psychic pain around the fact that I'm not a good reader."

During her early twenties, she played in indie rock bands around Austin. Her first recording experiences involved making demos, and she soon found recording more appealing than playing songs. "I really liked this idea of layering things, and as I was incorporating those kind of sounds more into the band, it started to cause tension, because it was just supposed to be an art rock band, and I didn't want to sing any more, I didn't want to play guitar, I just wanted to make these weird sounds on the four-track."

She fell in with a pair of sound artists, Seth Nehil

and John Grzinich. Together, they began presenting site-specific performances in drainage tunnels and other unlikely locations. After concluding that Texas was not the best place to pursue such work, she moved to Chicago in 1996. "I enrolled for classes at the Art Institute," recalls Block. "They had a sound programme, which at that time was really rare. I took a lot of classes, and met people through those classes. Through that, I met Lou Mallozzi, who was then director of Experimental Sound Studio, and that relationship became really important to me, because I did a lot of projects through the ESS over the years."

She also put a personal ad in *Chicago Reader*, which connected her with two other figures. One was Adam Sonderberg, currently of the group Haptic, who has contributed to several of her records. The other was Jim O'Rourke. "I listed my influences, and I remember one was Giancarlo Toniutti, who was this weird Italian sound artist who was making these beautiful records, but they were very rare. So, Jim O'Rourke answered the ad, and I picked up the phone, and he was like, 'How do you know who this Giancarlo Toniutti is?' We started talking and then he invited me to play the trumpet – I play a little bit of trumpet – on a recording session. And through that meeting I met Jeb Bishop, who was a trombonist here, and through Jeb, I met all these other musicians who were interested in playing different types of scores and doing improvised concerts."

The acquaintance with O'Rourke proved short-lived, since he moved to New York not long after she moved to Chicago. But Block's obsessions have a way of redirecting her career. In the early 2000s, she became determined to learn how to arrange orchestral music. "There was a time when I was literally obsessed with learning how to score music for orchestra, it was all I thought about, it was all I wanted to do. I focused my whole life on that, I went back to school, at a conservatory, as an adult, which was weird. And I learned those skills and kind of learned the limitations of the orchestra, and learned that the things I wanted to do with the orchestra I couldn't necessarily do."

This discovery informed the album *Karren*, on which Block constructs a dialogue between orchestral strings and sounds of pages being rustled, objects dropped and other noises that orchestras make, but would prefer that you not hear. Another consequence of her sojourn at the conservatory was getting reacquainted with original instrument, the piano. "I had a lot of time in the practice rooms with the grand pianos," she says. "Through those interactions, I started to have a practice of inside piano work, and a little bit of work on the keyboard itself, but much more inside a piano, using the strings and the wood and the metal and resonating those materials."

Inside-piano work began to figure prominently in Block's concerts, and provided essential material to *Resolution*, her collaborative album with Greg Kelley. Later, in 2017, she recorded a self-titled solo CD for Another Timbre that placed her inside-piano techniques in dialogue with brief returns to the keyboard.

Other, less musical, curiosities have fed significantly into Block's work. "At the end of my marriage, my ex-husband and I were in therapy and trying to work things out. The therapist had us doing this back and forth kind of dialogue, where we would formally stop and start talking, and the listener and the talker were

both assigned. We taped those on microcassette recorder, and then we would listen back to the tapes. The listening back to the tapes began to be this big thing in our relationship. And the process got me focused on the way that people talk on tape and what their voices sound like, and why people would ever even use a microcassette recorder.

"That's when I started to order tapes on eBay, and lots of these tapes that were advertised as blank had a lot of material on them," she continues. "It was almost like an interesting way of devaluing this really personal material that was on the tape. And these weird coincidences started to happen in my life, where right around the divorce I ordered some blank microcassette tapes, because I wanted to record some things with this microcassette player I had. And I listened to the tapes, and it was someone else's divorce. It was very personal, very emotional material. And so, I could relate to the story of the person on this tape, it was like this was me or something."

Microcassettes were also the seed that became *October, 1984*. "The same thing happened when my dad died," she explains. "I had a lot of blank tapes with this man talking on them, and this man was amazing, he had these beautiful, articulate memos to himself. In a way, I feel like I'm getting this overview of these people's lives, in these personal little swathes in these tapes, you know. In some way I relate to these people. I'm going through things they are going through, and maybe it's a distant way of expressing my own life story through these tapes."

Concurrent with exploring orchestral scoring and collections, Block has developed sound installations that cultivate an awareness not only of listening, but of the impact of sound upon other creatures. "It's very different from the recorded work, and it's much more about logistics and planning and ideas and community engagement," she says. "This is where my ideas about animals, and animals listening, comes in. There's always some aspect of those kinds of projects that is research-based, and that gives something back to the community that relates to those animals."

Presented at Flagler College in St Augustine, Florida, *Four Channels* diffused sounds that had been identified as conducive to a healthy ecosystem for oysters through speakers set inside structures designed for oyster habitation. When the exhibit was done, the habitats went back into the water. And *Susurrations*, a piece of landscape architecture whose construction upon Chicago's Northerly Island has been placed on hiatus by the pandemic, is designed to comprise three metre tall walls of non-invasive grasses arrayed into the shapes of various species' ear bones. "One of the things that I really wanted to do with this project is to have this outdoor living installation that animals might use, like certain animals use that grass for bedding, to lay in it at night, and then it would also be a nice thing for people to come and listen to. I'm thinking of creating pieces that are almost architecture for animals, so it's not just for people. It's an expansion of: who listens?"

Her most ambitious installations to date occupy some very human-centric creations. In 2015, she used the sound system suspended over the great lawn of the Pritzker Pavilion in Chicago's Millennium Park to realize *Sonambient Pavilion*, a surround-sound mix of recordings made of a nearby Harry Bertoia sculpture. And two years later, at the Rockefeller Chapel, on