avid Dunn is a composer and sound designer who has worked in a wide variety of audio media inclusive of traditional and experimental music, installations for public exhibitions, radio broadcasts, and film soundtracks. He co-founded the Independent Media Lab in Santa Fe and is the author of Music, Language, and Environment. Lizbeth Rymland is a poet, writer, philosopher, and world explorer.

LIZBETH RYMLAND: I see your work as the use of sound for conceptual invocation, as the working of tools to bring non-human presence, or the intelligence of an eco-system, into awareness. I'm interested in the artists and scientists who are exploring the landscape and its inhabitants as a highly mercurial, mutable, protein domain. I believe that is where evolution always wants to go, into a more facile mutability of forms. Plants change direction towards the sun, and respond to moonlight as if silently cheering. Birds practice directional navigation and aerodynamics in what appears to human eyes as a very pleasurable pastime. For human beings to continue here on Earth may depend on learning to play the way animals play. I believe that this proto-behavior requires the evolution of tools and techniques, and calls for the epemeralization of technology: materials used for transport, communication, or vision becoming smaller and more lightweight, perhaps incorporated into the body. Maybe sound is much a part of that mutability, the harmonic call for communicating with the algorithms of DNA. Your work strives to achieve a part of that evolutionary process. I want to ask you about your pieces that communicate sonically with the mindness or intelligence of environments. Can you make a bridge from your working objective and methods to a future science?

DAVID DUNN: I have mixed feelings about the use of technology in relationship to the issues you're raising. On one level my interest has been in using technology as a kind of recapitulation to natural magic, using the technology as the ground of power through which "magic" could take place. I've also been interested in understanding the artistic use of technology as a desire to humanize and create some sort of critique for the cultural milieu that we exist in. Technology is, in large part, the culture that we live in. On a practical level, I'm not sure whether the kinds of things you are describing can take place through the use of technology. While my interest is to explore some of these possibilities, I'm very torn with regard to achieving them through a technical means.

LR: What means do you use to explore this?

DD: Are you talking about popular music?

LR: I'm talking about familiar music, western or non-western, that manipulates emotion with a small "e." Even though I delight in these human states of consciousness, I wonder about their gravitational pull. I often feel somehow narcotized by them. The insectivale soundscapes you've made trigger some other set of responses in the mind-body that I experience only with psychoactive substances. I see that the patterning within your music might also provide some clues as to how we might communicate with our DNA to change forms if we want to, or to nanotechnically spring structures into visibility and back again into invisibility. Do you actually make a methodology of examining the patterns within an environment and watching for the synchronistic or psycho-physical

DD: My desire has been to redefine the science of bio-acoustics, which has been the study of the sound and communication behavior of non-human creatures: birdsongs, the sound of frogs and insects, mammals, invertebrates, and the emergent properties that occur from the interaction of life forms within an eco-system. My interest has been to expand the science of bio-acoustics to be inclusive of the various properties that could link together music, human language, and non-human communication behavior. My so-called musical compositions have really been research experiments which try to demonstrate certain environmental behaviors in response to a sonic stimulus that I place into the environment. The important part is not the resulting sounds as a musical structure, but rather that the resulting sounds are evidence of these emergent properties of interaction. They demonstrate characteristics of emergent behavior between myself and the environment.

LR: When you've dipped your hydrophones into ponds and amplified the sounds of microorganisms, the resulting acoustic tracings sound like some kind of extraterrestrial, insectival jazz which is exquisite, and even danceable. But your work does not elicit the typical emotional response of nostalgia so often associated with other music.

DD: My path of exploration has been to use various technologies as a means for interacting with the physical environment and non-human life forms. My way of conceptualizing that is to look at the linkages between music, language, and the environment. By music, I don't mean what we are familiar with when we usually use the word "music," at least in terms of western art/music traditions. But rather, I mean to look at it from a larger historical perspective, and as a parallel system to spoken language, as a model for ways in which we can use sound as a means for interaction with the non-human world.

LR: In working with an ethic of mutability or mercuriality, I begin with a departure from the making of artifacts, which seem somehow hermetically sealed from systemic communication with the non-human world of elements, plants, animals, and spirit. Artifacts, such objects that sit in an art gallery, or musical tunes that play on the radio, seem to be somehow sequestered, or sealed off, from a greater systemic interplay with phenomena. Poetry used to be invocation-

THE ART WORLD IS TOO OFTEN CONSUMED BY FASHION AND THE TRIVIALIZATION OF INTELLIGENCE

—DAVID DUNN
CALL FOR MAGIC IN TECHNOLOGY

NO ACTS OF CONSCIENCE
WITHOUT MAGIC,
NO ACTS OF MAGIC
WITHOUT CONSCIENCE
—LIZBETH RYMLAND

DD: The power of music is that it has effects upon the mind-body which in many ways are analogous to the effects of hallucinogens of psychoactive substances. We change when listening to a piece of music. Music is one of the most physically affecting of artforms. It penetrates the body in an omnidirectional manner. It surrounds and penetrates the body. The emotional associations attributed to music since the Romantic Age are inductive states of consciousness that result from this physical experience. So in that sense, music is analogous to drugs. It is no accident that the linkages between rock ‘n’ roll and psychedelics occurred. Music has provided a kind of hold-over, or parallel communicative strategy for maintaining the integrity of certain kinds of archaic states of mind. My interest is in trying to get back to the source and to show these archaic links between music as a human activity and the possibility of communication with the non-human living environment.

LR: Could you give me an example?

DD: Take the case of the ponds. It is an attempt to provide evidence, in a research sense, of what those links might be by concentrating on some of the most primitive of creatures. These insects reside in bio-habitats (freshwater ponds) as small as ten feet in diameter. By simply recording these things, focusing on them with a kind of sonic microscope, unimagined levels of complexity are revealed—associative properties to dance and musical rhythms. I think it is incredibly important that we understand the existence of such phenomena even at the level of something as supposedly primitive as a small water beetle.

LR: Part of what we have been talking about involves a change in the cultural landscape—the ephemeralization of technology, the tools and materials becoming smaller and more lightweight, and then incorporating them into the body. I see the future role of artists and scientists as creators of a vast landscape and playground of delight and pleasure, one in which we can enjoy ourselves as animals do. Our bodies could be covered by a filmy substance, intermittently sparked with phosphorescent lights through which we could warm, cool, and feed ourselves, even communicate with other creatures at a distance. I think of vast tracts of holographic ranges for roving teenagers, with apparitions that tease, coax, haunt, provoke, and seduce the kids into new feats of velocity, agility, and sensory prowess. Artists should take over Los Alamos and play with evolutionary potential. Artists should take over Hughes Aircraft and Rockwell Laboratories in order to transform the landscape of technology and its oppressive cultural forms into a more mercurial and botanically sensitive one. The aim: to strip away material density and weight.

LR: You’ve talked before about the artist as ‘systems integrator.’ What does that mean exactly?

DD: What I refer to as ‘systems integrator’ is that the artist would enter into unfamiliar domains, domains generally grid of certain kinds of creative thought, and apply a unique understanding of structure, materials, and conceptual creativity. The question should be: Where is art needed?

LR: And the answer could be: On the level of deep structural understanding and not merely as decoration.

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