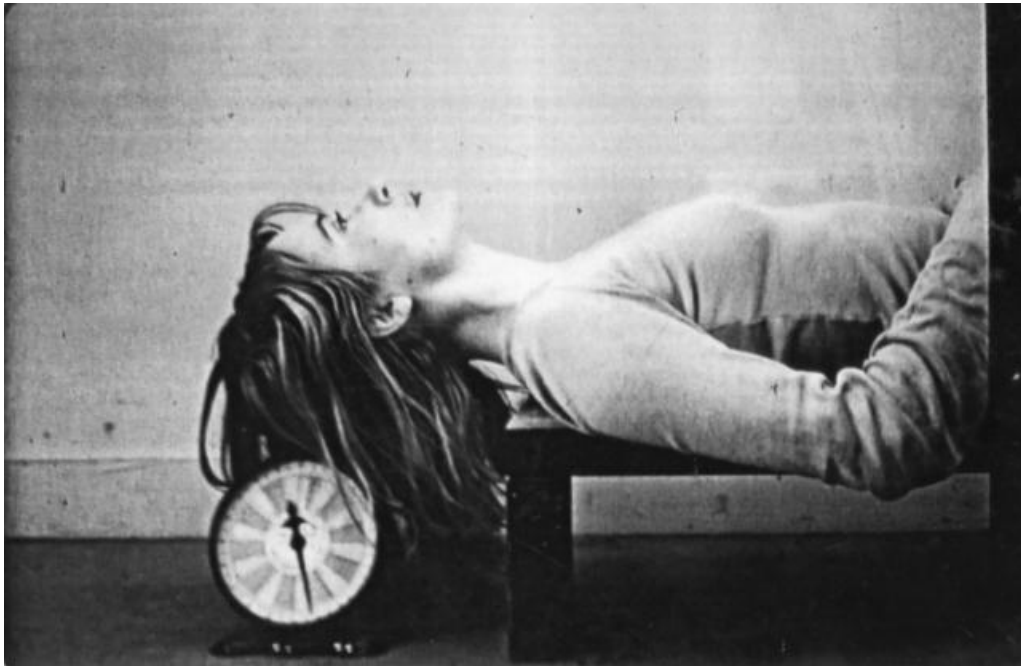


WI R E

Maryanne Amacher: Selected Writings and Interviews

The late American sound artist's reflections on her often unrealised projects read like an inventory of magnificent monumental ruins.

By Tim Rutherford-Johnson
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Maryanne Amacher, cover of *Intelligent Life* treatment, early 1980s

"All of my work is about the sensitivity human beings - biological intelligences - really have, but may not be conscious of," wrote the sound artist Maryanne Amacher in a letter to the Dutch curators Wies Smals and Josine van Droffelaar in 1980. Amacher, who died in 2009, left a legacy that, like the transplantations of environmental sounds from one location into the listening space of another that form the backbone of her work, can be found only at the threshold of perception. Resistant throughout her life to recording or documentation - although she welcomed the dynamic possibilities presented by the arrival of CDs in the 1980s - very little of her music can be easily heard today; and much of what there is has been extracted

from much larger pieces. Last year's release of the 40 minute piano duo *Petra* on Blank Forms Editions was a rare and welcome addition to her discography.

Blank Forms is also the home of the Maryanne Amacher Foundation, established earlier this year by a group of her friends and collaborators with the aim of increasing the volume of that legacy so that it can be experienced by all. One of the Foundation's chief tasks is processing Amacher's archive - a vast collection of more than 100 boxes of notebooks, sketches, tapes, scores and other media - currently held at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. *Selected Writings And Interviews* is one of the first fruits of that work and serves not as final summation of the archive and Amacher's legacy, but really a first, open-mouthed gasp at the rich possibilities it may hold.

This is, then, a preliminary pass through those documents. Presented in six chronologically ordered sections it offers a map through the main points in Amacher's career, including the 1967 Buffalo installation *In City* (later known as *City-Links #1*); the *City-Links* pieces of the 70s with which her name is most closely associated; her work with Merce Cunningham and John Cage; and the *Living Sound*, *Mini Sound Series* and *Intelligent Life* projects of the 80s. Each section is prefaced with an independently recorded interview with Amacher related to the themes of that section. The documents themselves cover a range of formats, from mathematical notes on musical acoustics to programme notes; they reveal across a patchwork of details the breadth of Amacher's thinking about sonic architecture, environmental sound, auditory perception and musical spatiality, as well as her own fastidious working methods (including the unbroken three day listening sessions she required to prepare her installations).

Perhaps most telling are a pair of personal letters. The collection begins with one written in the mid-60s by Amacher to her parents (incomplete, and possibly never sent), setting out, in the uncompromising fashion that would characterise all her work, her ambitions for the musical career that she was just beginning. Towards the end is another to her friend and mentor Cage in 1983. Written in the midst of a personal financial crisis - precipitated by the ailing health of her mother and the sudden death in a plane crash of Smals and Van Droffelaar, which brought to an end her plans to realise her monumental media opera *Intelligent Life* - it is a stark memento of the precarious nature of her existence, even 20 years into her career. A few pages later we are told that in the 90s Amacher was only able to realise "a small handful of full-scale works" satisfactorily, and from here to the end of the book most of the documents point towards projects that were never completed or performed, including a work for Kronos Quartet (unperformed and possibly incomplete), a series of VR works called *Rare And Unusual Atmospheres* (wholly unrealised) and some tantalising suggestions that she may have intended to perform at Woodstock 94 (no public documents indicate that she did, however). The final third thus begins to read something like the inventory of a ruin.

Yet reading also brings the force and originality of Amacher's thought back into existence. It remains to be seen how much of her sonic legacy the Foundation will be able to restore, but the texts collected in this first book-length publication show Amacher anticipating and contending with aesthetic and technological issues that remain pertinent a decade after her death. Her work was, Cimini and Dietz lament in their introduction, "paradigmatically incompatible with the world as currently structured along gendered, racialised, temporalised, capitalised fault lines"; perhaps re-engaging with Amacher's uncompromising vision can help restructure that world to all our advantage.