

Alan S. Tofighi on Landry

Recursive Fields & Perceptual Games: The interlocking work and works of Dickie Landry

In the long game of artistic production, the frameworks of sustainability—conceptually & financially—have primarily been obscured, diverted, or minimised up until recent interests in practical & praxis driven analyses of the biographical. While it can often escape the work in question or divert analysis, cases remain where said work has taken on a shifting of form and/or trajectories have aligned where a such a holistic analysis is pertinent, as is the case with the multivalent and interdisciplinary work of Richard “Dickie” Landry (b. 1938). Within Landry’s continual practice active and seminal engagement—within his own practice or in collaboration—has taken place within the fields of Minimalism; in music and hard edge abstraction, video, performance, photography, and social practice. Equally versed in the varying disciplines he worked in, it is within this distinction—that of work, implicated with and around continual infinite games—that are the crux of Landry’s decades long career. As will be illustrated continuously, it is a combination of labor, and the generative impetus of collaboration, improvisation, and play that forms the game of the complex body of work that Landry operates. With a list of collaborators that includes but is by no means limited to Lawrence Wiener, Philip Glass, Joan Jonas, Gordon Matta-Clark, Laurie Anderson, Paul Simon, Robert Wilson, The Anarchitecture Group, and Food as just a few aspects of Landry’s nexus, it is necessary to analyse the work as not only a catalyst for interaction, but the actualised documentation of time and perception only possible in retrospect after playing a long form game. Due to the complexity of history, disciplines, and the 21st Century’s *rediscovery* of the existence of the interdisciplinary artist, it has often been the case that Landry’s work is framed within the discipline of photography, due the historical magnitude of said photographs. A similar but oblique lens to frame the photos is that of Weegee’s *New York*, apt as that this is Landry’s *New York*, a crucial time and place, that has in one way or another become “Our” New York, dually a documented reality but an eternal imaginary of a pre-Giuliani and even pre-SoHo NY. Representing an otherwise seemingly impossible milieu of artists, events, and actions; the seminal documentations have proliferated through their endless repetition unified against the odds that one was present for so many crucial developments. As astonishing as these links may seem, they are but one of many links in the connecting grids of Landry’s work and will not be the primary focus of this essay but will be referenced in the larger context of their practice.

Working History (abridged)

Born in Cecilia, Louisiana Landry would have three crucial encounters during formative stage of his life, the first being picking up the saxophone at the age of ten which

would culminate in a degree in musical education degree from Southwestern Louisiana Industrial Institute¹ in 1964. During this time Landry would work continually within Big Band, Blue Eyed Soul, arranging, and educational contexts fully versed in the performance and durational aspect of his instrument. Prior to this in 1956, while reading *Time* magazine Landry would come across Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* (1955). Already interested in contemporary developments in AbEx, Landry would immediately come to see *Bed* as the landmark It was using the vernacular of modernist developments in abstraction to formalise the very idea of the frame, and more crucially art and life ushering in a complexity of networks and interactions immediately influential to Landry. Receding further within the chain of influence to 1944 (when Landry was six) his father had installed electricity to the family farm and acquired a radio set. While listening to the Saturday night heavy weight fights live from Madison Square Garden the third crucial chance encounter would arrive as as Landry recalled "this raspy voice would come and say, "Live from the streets of New York, Jazz with Moondog." Moondog was my first introduction to jazz and first NYC underground hero."². With such a crucial foundation, work ethic, and series of seminal influences, Landry would visit New York in 1968 staying with fellow Louisianan (by-way of Mamou) Keith Sonnier. In December of that year, Sonnier would mention seeing a performance by Philip Glass describing the event as "not only aurally interesting but also visually interesting. Phillip had built a square and placed one contentious sheet of music which a violinist walked around and performed the piece." Intrigued, Landry was given Glass's number and would meet him for dinner. Glass would eventually say he had to make tea for his blind friend who was living with him: Moondog. Memories recirculating, Landry would remark to himself "If this man, Phillip Glass has Moondog living with him, I have to pay attention to who this man, Phillip Glass, is". Landry would join Glass for another dinner with Steve Reich, David Behrman, and James Tenney amongst others each performing their own works. Landry, impressed and giving praise to Glass's piece was told in response by Glass that he was starting an ensemble in January to which he could join. Immediately accepting, he would move to New York in 1969. However, assuming it was a steady gig, Landry would soon realize it was for one show, and go into work with Glass as a plumber for two years in addition to being a founding member of the ensemble performing from 1969-1981. The period would include a decades long collaboration with Robert Wilson with the landmark performance of *Einstein on the Beach* at the 1976 Avignon Festival.

Concurrently via Sonnier (then working at Leo Castelli Gallery) Landry would work as an assistant for Richard Serra composing the form of the work *2+2+1* (1969), as well as

¹ Currently University of Louisiana at Lafayette

² <http://www.dickielandry.com/photography/utz501a0c7hnbgvem2oyq4xpb3cccd>

within the Glass Ensemble firmly rooting Landry as an active member in both strands of post-minimalism. Around this time, Landry would assist a dancer in projecting a 16mm film via use of his apartment for the screening. At that premiere the first person to arrive was Robert Rauschenberg, striking a rapport before he could enter the door, Landry would serendipitously become acquainted with another one of his formative influences. Hearing that Sonnier would need a 16mm camera, Landry mentioned Rauschenberg had one and that he should call him. Following a similar pattern, Landry would instead call and end up meeting Rauschenberg for dinner, as recall:

“I was invited to dinner at 6pm at 6am the next morning, completely drunk, I was leaving with his camera. As I was walking out the door he said, “wait a minute, you are leaving with my \$12,000-dollar Arriflex Camera and I really don’t know who you are... pause... but you are from Lafayette so you are ok.”

This event, potentially disastrous in any other person's hands, would lead to a great friendship with Landry regularly performing at Rauschenberg’s openings as well as being a part of the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI) (1985-1991).

In a similar trajectory, Landry would be invited to Joan Jonas’ first outdoor performance *Jones Beach Piece* (1970). Borrowing a friend's camera and shooting the work, Landry would later receive a call from Jonas the next morning asking if he would be interested in selling some of the photos. Inadvertently becoming a photographer alongside his work as a plumber, Landry would become a crucial nexus point in the documentation and facilitation of pre-SoHo New York documenting the otherwise elusive and ephemeral activities of Gordon Matta-Clark, Food, Steve Reich, Robert Wilson, Mary Heilmann, Philip Glass, and rarest of all; a wryly smiling William S. Burroughs.

The Axonometric Screen

While actively working with the Philip Glass Ensemble and as a photographer, Landry would begin a series of formally driven images in 1971. Recalling his early use of video in performance, Landry would form the template of his images—outside the camera frame—off the field of axonometric projection. In this frame the anamorphic dimensions of the cathode ray screen would be (re)presented and its rounded limits squared-off, formalising the screen as an abstraction as well as the limits of Hard Edge itself. By 1974, Landry would introduce the aspect of the *Ray O Gram*, in which photographic paper is exposed while images could be placed on the paper to further imprint on the surface. Echoing the spectral effects of a transient image left on the analog screen of a cathode ray

TV, the Ray O Gram works reference, and formalise the developments of the image itself as it has formed and shifted since the widespread arrival of AbEx and consumer grade electronics via television and photography. These early works—always intended as paintings but limited by a continually expanded touring schedule—would return as paintings in the 1990's continuing their warping of visual modes and trajectories. Within the formal framework of this division and re-visioning of the grid and the screen, the paintings play on the perception and reframing of perception and the mind itself as the anti-illusionary space of the hard-edged grid is wrapped against its own history.

Time's Loop & Recursive Drones

Simultaneous with his work as a performer in the minimalist milieu of the early 1970's, Landry would concurrently develop several systems for solo performance. Regarding Landry's entrance as a performer/composer would be his first solo show at Leo Castelli on February 19, 1972. Taking place over five hours and released in 1973 on Chatham Square Productions as *Solos*, this crucial entry point of developments in free improvisation & gallery debut of Landry would soon be jettisoned for new means of performance. Firmly rooted in developments and histories of Jazz and European New Music tradition, Landry would synthesise currents and schisms of the latter half of the 20th century into a new generative form. Of said schism, it be said reductively that Originating via Arnold Schoenberg's development of atonality via the tone rows to preserve tonal harmony in the wake of chromaticism, this mapping of the grid would become dually crucial to formal thought via influence on Kandinsky directly & adjacently via Mondrian and application to the grid and the eventual developments of Serialism. The 1950's would see a totalisation of these forms eventually culminate into a rigidity of disciplines with little to no room for interaction. As serialism worked to formalise the mode of composition itself and AbEx would work to purely preserve the disciplines by removing the illusionary space of painting, the frame, and influence via the truly abstract forms of composition. Subsequently & adversarially international developments in Fluxus would coincide with the endpoint of their interaction with these forms and isolation of the disciplines. Within the field of music the very question of time and phenomenology of sound itself became a central point, a key shift initiated by Tony Conrad's application of acoustics, and mathematical principles into the music performed with La Monte Young & John Cale as the Dream Syndicate. This first wave of minimalism would set crucial precedents of formalism and duration later present in the plastic arts in the work of Robert Morris, Donald Judd, and Warhol's *Empire*. As the second formation of pattern-based Minimalism took form repetition would take precedent amplifying the interlocking, phasing, perceptual, and

phenomenological aspects of a crucially selected series of sounds and derivations repeated during performance and through a selection and fragmentation of time.

Synthesising these two derivations in New Music—the microtonal drone based minimal music & the pattern minimalism developed with Philip Glass—Landry would pioneer the usage and collaboration of an intricate and cybernetically driven quadraphonic delay system in 1974 in which new qualities of both histories could only become evident by this technique. Captured on record & engineered by Kurt Munkacsi, the recordings would be released as *Fifteen Saxophones* (1977) on Northern Light Records; the album would prove a crucial document for the entirely ephemeral nature of the work. As with Landry's performances with *The Sound Machine*³, it is within the quadraphonic delay works that it is not only the instrument or the system being performed but the room acoustically itself as sound refracts—with and against—its origin as the room acoustically shapes the return. In these performances the question of time is rendered audibly as the possibilities of its manipulation and collaboration, recursively or otherwise.

The Drone of Time|The Workings of Space

Analysing Landry's place in development's in music and image, the boundary to the real and the laboured is unquestionable. While often buried in the romanticisation and occasional fabulation on the conception of New York, Landry's New York was one that predated the idealisation of the imaginary. In this era, the flight of businesses from the area left an unpopulated zone of nearly abandoned buildings, warehouses, and factories up for decay. Several programs were developed to encourage population of these zones—primarily tax breaks for artists—leading to the rise of the loft and alternative space origins of which is now the collective mental image of 1960's New York. In these early anarchic years, decay, refuse, and possibility were analysed and exploited heavily by several post-minimalist artists. This reconstruction & recombination was most acutely actualized by the Anarchitecture group, most synonymous with Gordon Matta-Clark but which also included Landry, Tina Suzanne Harris Girouard, Carol Goodden, Laurie Anderson, Richard Nonas, Jene Highstein, and Bernard Kirschenbaun. As the Anarchitecture Group analysed the psychological aspects and consequences wrought by Modernism & its architecture, parallel to this research would be Food, the artist run restaurant formed by Gordon Matta-Clark, Tina Girouard, and Caroline Gooden. Originating with the 1971 *Brooklyn Bridge Event*, where Clark roasted an entire pig—with music performed by Landry—the subsequent communal gathering and meal was seen as a necessary one, as only one other restaurant was open at the time. Gathering the funds and opening FOOD, it served as a crucial nexus

³ A modified single organ pipe to generate a constant tone.

point of social interaction, critique, employment, and performance in the development of the area. While it would serve as a key landmark in the development of so-called relational aesthetics, it must be said that FOOD's legacy is cemented in not just its conceptual goals, and occasional conceptual eateries, but in its direct praxis of maintaining its function, employment, communal space, and most essential its affordability. In this blending of practicality, the first Anarchitecture works were able to be deployed as well as countless other unions and developments in post-minimal history. In this methodology; constant work and labour parallel to artistic production is one of a different formalisation of time; that of personal time where sustainability and the outside meet if only obliquely. Often downplayed in the varying histories, it was an era of not only site-specific work but time and space specific work, often completed on the spot and in the space. Critiquing & refuting the notion of the Artist struck by genius in solitude, the artist working with flows of time, on the turn of a dime, reified the notion that by being open and complicit with forms, a work can be done with rigour and intensity continuously. Each derivation engaging with new outcomes & realisations via works & processes where the ability to engage with time, perception, & timing are set. The duality between play, and labour combine and counteract each other countering Minimalism & repetition away from an otherworldly sublime⁴. Parallel to Landry's mythical work with FOOD, the Anarchitecture Group, and as a plumber alongside Philip Glass⁵, the driving force remains with his constant work tending to his farm, in Cecilia. Ultimately, work shifts complexly into aesthetic work where life can be formalised, and improvisation is the long waiting game of observation and opportunity crucially acted upon at any moment. Returning to the photos one last time, 'Badminton' Philip Glass and Bruce Nauman (1971) depicts its namesake. Within this image is the crux of Landry's work, the otherwise impossible meeting place of rigour, play, the grid, and the precision of time & its perception. Masters of their own games, an impossibility is captured by one wholly in a different game outside the capture grid and forms at play. Within the varied works is the framework of the long con/game of continual development and process in life and the formalisation and engagement with that abstracting. In Landry's work the game is set, and contingency—in all its forms—takes hold. The most complex and difficult

⁴ Such a Schism can be seen once again in the nebulous zone of first wave minimalism in which Young's renaming and re-centering of the group as the *Theatre of Eternal Music* as a compositional unit reified the otherworldly and a top down structure of the composer as conduit, as opposed to the *Dream Syndicate* establishing a group and liminal based notion of improvisation, listening, and audience. This enactment of the drone would later be reframed during the concerts of Phil Niblock where his mictoronal drone music would be paired with video of hard labour being performed cementing the drone as an eternal force alongside the realities of labour and time, realist magic.

⁵ Cementing the era, Glass interviewed for the Guardian in 2001 describes meeting with Time Magazine Art Critic Robert Hughes while installing a dishwasher in his loft, "staring at me in disbelief. 'But you're Philip Glass! What are you doing here?' It was obvious that I was installing his dishwasher and I told him I would soon be finished. 'But you are an artist,' he protested. I explained that I was an artist but that I was sometimes a plumber as well and that he should go away and let me finish."

application of chance & method only possible by being open to the game: the incomparable navigation of the world & time via its returns & reformulations.