Part 2: "A Project Of Memory And Forgetting"



[0] A Time Capsule Or A Grave is a lecture I initially developed for an art and technology festival in France called Octobre Numerique Faire Monde. I am allegedly a pioneer of the so called metaverse and I am often summoned to perform expertise on the matter. It is not characteristic of me to prepare remarks. I typically dress like I am dressed here and chain smoke through each address as an anti-professional statement. This persona, Miss Sammie, is my current avatar. I describe the original lecture as a polemic wrapped in a eulogy.

I have found myself writing this same eulogy over and over since I transitioned. Forgetting is the left hand of memory. Art becomes a portal through time, a potent channel activated only after you've forgotten making the artifact. Silly me, before I even called it art, the blueprint was written. We can come back to now, it will always be here.

Let's see what I knew before I knew what I was talking about. In those days, I made worlds with sound which I now realize were the prototypes of the world projected behind me. Interposed in my remarks tonight are two essays written in Fall of 2020 to accompany two releases in a four-part sound art collection, which I created or compiled in the interstitial zone between my past self and my current self. For this brief moment we passed each other on a sandbar circumgirded by deep ocean.

Provincial Skinflint - December 11, 2015



[0′ → 1?] Six Tape Works and One Exploded Composition are the left and right hands. Provincial Skinflint is the feet. I reencountered Audacity, a free Digital Audio Workstation, through a French dictation assignment and saw that it was possible to cut and splice strips of audio much like one does with analog tape. I was immediately enthralled. I said at the time that it felt more like compulsion than creation. The same can be said for most of my music.

I was abroad without any of my guitar toys as crutches. I was experiencing the early joys of dysphoria and the early dividends of trauma. I needed to make music. Thank goodness I found a way to do so. I admit these are intentionally rough around the edges, but they form the foundation of my field collaging practice.

I later learned this is called musique concrete. Reading Eliane Radigue's 'Intermediary Spaces,' I felt immense kinship with her work and her airplanes. She only got to hear six per day when she lived in Nice with no tape recorder. She wrote a timetable so she wouldn't miss them. I couldn't keep airplanes out of my field recordings if I tried. Neither of us could keep whatever that sound was out of our minds. The listening was the site of her work and mine, the artifact itself is secondary.

The Tvordis Veeler mask was constructed at this time too, a mechanism I now realize was defense. This is Tvordis's first work of art, and I, Sammie, remain a faithful archivist of his oeuvre after his passing. Some say I was his muse, but I wouldn't be so self important. Like Eliane, I didn't see the significance of what I was doing and feeling until much later. Before this was art, it was a game.

Audacity has been more important to my work than any guitar, pedal, plugin, or synthesizer. And it's free. It's obvious that I didn't make this music to get famous, or even to make people happy. I made this because I needed to.

With this triptych of hands and feet finally resolved, perhaps my next work will come nearer to my body.

Back To Now

[2→3] I see the avatar more like clothes than a body. Avatars can contain as much fiction as you like. That is part of the fun. You are only one part visual- an expansive domain to experiment in, but far from the only one. This recurring shape in my work is a visual manifestation of Miss Sammie. I don't always have a body online and I enjoy the internet's ability to facilitate disembodied experience. But when I have to have just one, this is what I look like.



It took me two months to write an essay about being trans while also polemicizing the metaverse for a predominantly cis, straight audience at the intersection of art and technology. It was one of the more difficult works of art I have ever made. My tone was stern and urgent. I played a character of the female archivist preserving the legacy of the dead male artist. The polemic was for them. The eulogy is for you.

The metaphor of death, which I did not reveal as a metaphor to the festival audience, was one of those negotiations trans people use to trick the cis into seeing us. I think it is safe to assume the audience of an all trans performance program does not need the same coddling. So let me drop the metaphor and speak frankly.

I think many of us are familiar with the oversimplifications we use to make ourselves legible to cis people. Some are more pernicious than others. "It's like I was a woman trapped in a man's body" presupposes a self divided in two discrete and opposing entities when in reality we are not one, two, ten, or ten thousand. Identity is an uncountable quantity. Or, as weapon, "you killed my son, daughter, husband, and so on."

Let's follow the fiction further into its logic and re-imagine the relationship between the dead and living versions of the self not as violence, but as collaboration. I have long used the metaphor of a "dead husband" to describe the man I used to live as. He made up the name Tvordis Veeler, the surname of which I retained after transition. We were married after all. I often use the dead husband terminology in conversation without explaining it. Almost every time I do, a while later the person I was speaking to would follow up either asking if it was a metaphor, or inquiring seriously about my status as a widow. Either way, the thought sat with them.

Field Collage - September 2020

[3→4] I made Provincial Skinflint from my immediately accessible environment of sounds while I was abroad using the internet, my iPhone, and sounds generated by the Audacity software.

I made these sound collages in 2016/17. This was the first use of the name 'field collage' to describe this process of washing and sorting sounds from my world. I always saw these like foley for a movie that never happened, or a movie witnessed only by me, but which implicates many others in various crimes against art. These are virtual spaces.

In 2015 I started using Audacity to generate confrontational and confusing sounds as Provincial Skinflint. Incongruity because I liked the grate of it. I suppose I had some things to confront.

The old mask hurt. This was a way to scream without anyone hearing me. I came home as Tvordis. He was a very good mask. I was home from my first time abroad alone with a new me to be. I should have known that the solution to feeling masked is not to make a better mask, but I don't regret the effort.

I wanted to make these sound collages as gifts for my friends. I wanted to be a person who makes gifts for her friends. I genuinely don't know what pronoun is appropriate here. I was a girl who didn't know she was a girl, but I was cultivating a masculinity. What grew was a peculiar shape indeed. It was a performance which I realize now was too deliberate to be convincing. Nonetheless it delighted most participants in the work.

fc2 is a self portrait of the little rock I wanted to be when I started my 22 year old life again again. 40 seconds, just some nice water I found.

I listened to this album often and made sounds like this for myself regularly that I discarded when I was finished playing. It was the music I wanted to listen to. The trains in Paris, the rain everywhere, my friends in Chicago, myself the tiniest bit, speaking rarely but fumbling the recorder constantly. I am here, you don't need me to tell you.

When I field collage I usually wait until I've forgotten some of what was recorded where. It sparks my mental images much better than a typical picture. This is a project of memory and forgetting.

Returning to the Avatar

[5] Tvordis was my previous avatar. A peculiar type of fiction. He is a virtual representation of my previous fictional identity as a man. My deadname is actually Sam Cortese. I created Tvordis as a survival strategy and he stayed with me for my last six years in the egg. He was a caricature of masculinity, a woman dressing up a doll while she waits to be born. A composite of Kerouac and Hunter S.

Thompson, he favored Hawaiian shirts, Canadian tuxedos, and Marlboro reds. He was always famous, but nobody could quite figure out for what.

The persistent virtual residue of his being remains. In the wired, he and I are made of the same substance. I speak of him as if he is an external entity but of course, he was not piloting that mechanical man, I was. Tvordis didn't die, he lived. I inherited his clothes, his body, his memories, and his personal data. My task in transition is to sort through these artifacts and decide which belong to me.



[6] He first manifested online through a composite of curated images and text. He made his transformation real by changing his name on Facebook. In the physical world, speech is not persistent. A spoken word can only be heard once. A world whose internal logic permits persistence in speech allows words to become part of your body. In the virtual, words flow around you like hair. Organic but not technically alive. Tethered temporarily to a living being and extant after slipping the bond.

We are aware that work by male artists is more valuable when they sign it and even more valuable when they die. They are remanded to the custody of archivists: the handmaidens of history, who are indeed predominantly women. The machinery of a history from which we are often absent. In this fiction, Tvordis is in on the joke. While he failed to sign his work, he performed the labor of dying, dutifully entrusting me with his archive so I could begin the work of preserving his legacy.

The first lecture ended with the punchline you already heard: "Today I perform for you in the flesh. Tomorrow, the audio recording of this lecture will be installed in the virtual space, and online visitors will share space with a dead version of me."

I will add the voices from each subsequent performance to form an ever-expanding chorus of dead Sammies.